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"AFTER FIVE YEARS AT THIS AMAZING CLUB I FEEL PART OF A REALLY SPECIAL THING"

JOEL MATIP

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L.F.C.



THE ONE AND ONLY

Thursday 2 Septemnber 2021 was the 118th anniversary of Bill Shankly's birth and there were many, many tributes. Among them Reds fan and writer Nicky Allt tweeted the famous Shanks quote "What a great day for football – all we need is some green grass and a ball" then added, "Happy birthday to the man who made the people happy, while busy making Liverpool great! #Messiah #Liverpool #Manager #Legend." Later this month it's the 40th anniversary of the great man's death, on 29 September 1981 aged just 68.



CORNER TAKEN QUICKLY



Just like Barcelona in 2019, the page where you don't know what to expect...

5 RED RONS

RONnie Whelan
Geoff StRONg
RONny Rosenthal
Andriy VoRONin
Big RON Yeats

OUR LADS HAVE COME FROM ALL OVER THE PLACE

Thiago (San Pietro Vernotico, Italy)

Thiago, Thiago Alcantara, was born in 1991 in San Pietro Vernotico – a town in the southeast of Italy. His dad, Brazilian midfielder Mazinho, was playing for Italian club Lecce at the time and with Google Maps showing their Via del Mare stadium is only 25 minutes away, it was handy for work.

It was 1107 AD when San Pietro Vernotico was first mentioned in an official document – exactly a century before Liverpool (the city) was founded by royal charter in 1207. As if it took another 685 years to form LFC.

The population of San Pietro Vernotico is 13,295. To put that into context, the capacity of the Sir Kenny Dalglish Stand at Anfield is 12,850, although they get better weather.

On the first weekend of August, San Pietro Vernotico hosts Festa di Lumaca (the festival of snails). The snails are served from steaming cauldrons with sauces, herbs or salt and eaten with yellow semolina breads. You don't get that from the Anfield food kiosks.

If Thiago wants to visit his birthplace he can get there from Rome on the Eurostar.

San Pietro Vernotico Station has been in use since 1866, three decades after Liverpool Lime Street (the world's oldest operating grand terminus mainline station) opened in August 1836.



BEST COMPARISON BETWEEN LIVERPOOL AND OTHER TEAMS

"Comparing with other teams is like comparing with other couples. You might think [another woman] is more beautiful but then you find out she is annoying all day."
Jürgen Klopp



BLAGGING IT

One of these three statements is true, the other two are made up. Can you suss it out?

- A member of Liverpool's 1981 European Cup-winning team made a cameo appearance in the British sitcom The Royle Family.

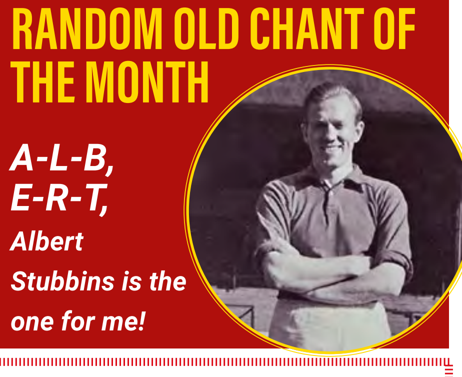
- A member of Liverpool's 1984 European Cup-winning team was the voice of a character in the Spanish version of Shrek II.

- A member of Liverpool's 2005 European Cup-winning team appeared in the French Netflix drama Lupin.

Answer: the much-missed Michael Robinson was the voice of Doris (Cinderella's ugly sister) in the Spanish translation of Shrek II. The other two were blags.

RANDOM OLD CHANT OF THE MONTH

A-L-B, E-R-T, Albert Stubbins is the one for me!



LFC players to have scored in less than 30 seconds

14 seconds Paul Walsh v West Ham (1984)
15 seconds Dave Hickson v Derby (1961)
15 seconds Naby Keita v Huddersfield (2019)
20 seconds Chris Lawler v Sunderland (1966)
21 seconds Kenny Dalglish v Everton (1985)
27 seconds Jimmy Melia v Bury (1961)
27 seconds Tony Hateley v Wolves (1967)
27 seconds Joe Cole v Steaua Bucharest (2010)
29 seconds Robbie Fowler v Middlesbrough (1996)



MIGHTY MATIP

Big Joel talks exclusively about last season's central-defensive saga and this campaign's bulked-up boost at the back

Interview: Chris McLoughlin

Joel Matip is sat in a reception area at the AXA Training Centre, close to the players' entrance, wearing a full Liverpool kit with his name and number on the back. And his football boots.

Given it's a Wednesday afternoon and training finished well over an hour earlier it sounds like classic 'No Context Joel Matip' content for the parody Twitter account devoted to the Liverpool defender. Yet there is a perfectly reasonable explanation.

This particular Wednesday is media-access day – aka 'green screen day' – at the AXA and Matip has just been in front of the cameras. To give it some context, green screen day is when television broadcasters and photographers film their visual content to be used throughout the season.

So when you see headshots of the Liverpool players for team line-ups on Sky Sports, BT Sport, Prime Video and BBC MOTD, they were all filmed today.

As were some Graphics Interchange Format images – GIFs to you and I – and goal celebrations. Which is rather apt as Matip had a major life-event to celebrate in June when his wife Larissa gave birth to a baby boy, the couple's first child.

They also celebrated their first wedding anniversary in August and Joel turned 30 on the day that Liverpool played Athletic Bilbao in a pre-season friendly at Anfield.

So it has been a summer of family milestones for Matip, but as he sits down for a first face-to-face magazine interview at the AXA Training Centre since coronavirus protocol kicked in, there can only be one place to start. Congratulations on the birth of your son, Joel...

"Thank you," he replies with smile that has got 'new dad' written all over it. "Being a father is wonderful, the best thing in the world. It has changed me as a person and changed my view of things. It has changed my life."

As every family knows, work gets in the way of parenting and after a month or so of family time Joel then had to spend a month away from his new-born as the Reds headed off to Austria and France for their pre-season training camp.

Having missed the final four months of last season with an ankle injury sustained when preventing Spurs' Son Heung-min from scoring during Liverpool's 3-1 win at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in January, pre-season marked Matip's return



to fitness – although it clearly wasn't easy to be away.

"It was quite hard being away for four weeks, especially at the beginning," he admits. "It was not that easy, but it belongs to the job and I was really happy to see them [his team-mates] again.

"Hard work belongs to pre-season and it is necessary, but I'm not sure 'enjoy' is the right word to describe it. I do it because I know it is necessary.

"Pre-season was good for me. I had no problems at all. It was good for me to train in nearly every session and I was in the best shape I could be for the first game at Norwich."

The summer arrival of Ibrahima Konate from RB Leipzig and return to fitness of Virgil van Dijk and Joe Gomez left Kopites guessing who Jürgen Klopp would field at centre-back for the Premier League season-opener at Carrow Road.

He went with Matip and Van Dijk who, incredibly, only spent eleven minutes alongside each other at centre-half during the entire 2020/21 campaign.

A clean-sheet in a 3-0 win against the Canaries, with Alisson only making one save of note until a triple-save late on, was a reminder of what a classy central defensive pairing they are.

Another clean-sheet followed in the 2-0 victory against Burnley at Anfield and afterwards a statistic emerged that revealed the Redmen had only lost one of the last 50 Premier League games that Matip had appeared in. Coincidentally that was the 1-0 reverse at home to Burnley last season with the previous defeat coming at Swansea City in January 2018.

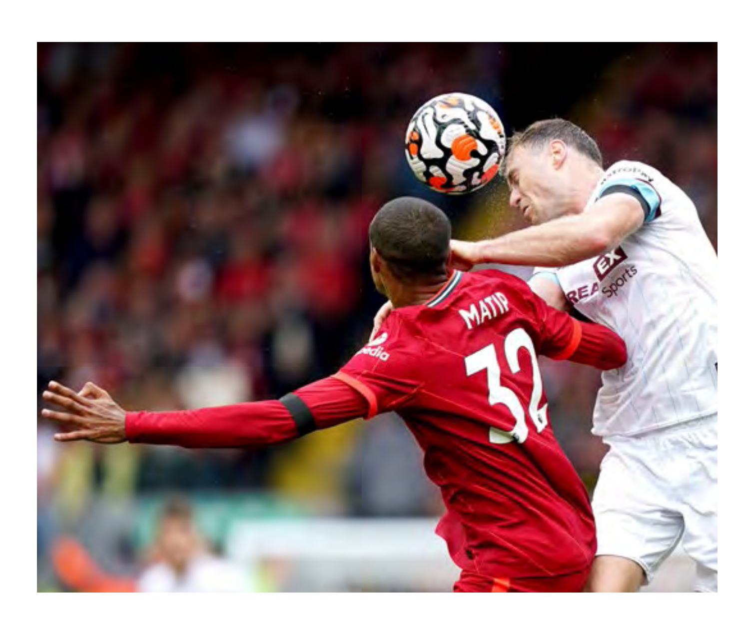
Remarkably, that 1-0 loss at the Liberty Stadium remains the only Premier League defeat that Liverpool have suffered when Matip and Van Dijk have lined up together in central defence – an even more incredible statistic when you consider it was also their first league game together following Virgil's arrival from Southampton in early 2018.

"It has been great for me to play alongside Virgil again," says Matip. "It was a long time for him to be out and I am really happy to see him back on the pitch. He's the complete centre-back.

"He is calm with the ball and great against the ball. He is a leader when we are playing and we missed him, but now he is back and that is good for us."

The nature of the football season schedule means that Klopp has already said that the pair won't start every game together at the back, even if injuries are hopefully avoided.

"I can tell you now already that because of the things that happened during the last year, we needed desperately to bring in the fourth centre-half and now we have six with Rhys and Nat Phillips," said the Liverpool manager following the 2-0 win against Burnley [Rhys Williams has subsequently joined Swansea City but only on loan].



"The first four will definitely play altogether. We have to mix it up and we will do that because none of these guys, especially after a long injury, should now then play all the time three games a week. We need to find a way to get used to that."

As the manager said, Konate's acquirement means new central defensive partnerships will be formed and Matip believes that it isn't just the centre-backs who will need time to gel but Liverpool's entire defensive unit including the goalkeeper and defensive midfielder.

"Everybody has the same idea of football in how we defend, but of course everybody reacts a little bit differently so you need to get adapted," he explains.

"It depends on the six who are playing because we do not all play the same way so we always have to make some small adaptions. But the idea of how we play – and how we defend – always stays the same. Of course, small adaptions are necessary for every player because every player is different.

"Ibou is settling in really good. It always takes some time to settle in general and in the defence to get a good connection. It needs time before I know how he will react and he will know how I react. We have trained a lot together and it will always need some time next to a new player, but he is already going really well."

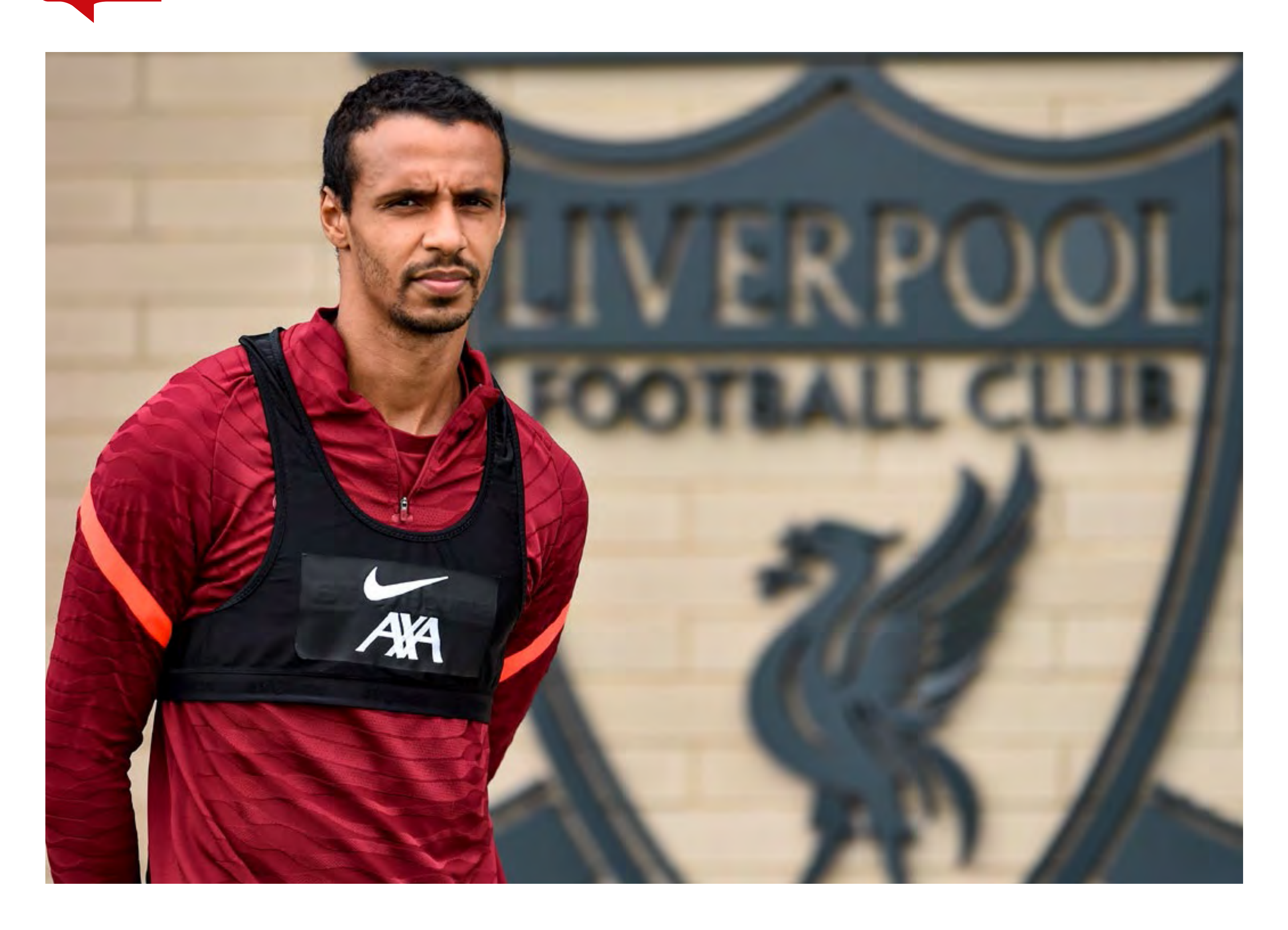
Another plus-point involves the easing of some coronavirus restrictions, allowing the AXA Training Centre to be used in the way the state-of-the-art facility was intended to be.

More staff have finally been allowed to work from the AXA and more facilities are now open. Along with supporters returning to stadiums, it is something the players are genuinely pleased about.

"The training centre is great," says Matip. "The facilities are great, the pitches are great and we have everything we need here to be in the best shape and to be as well prepared as we can.

"Melwood had something about it but here there is a direct connection to the Academy. I think it is a help for our young

EVERYBODY HAS THE SAME IDEA ABOUT HOW WE DEFEND, BUT OF COURSE EVERY PLAYER REACTS A LITTLE BIT DIFFERENTLY SO YOU ALWAYS HAVE TO ADAPT A LITTLE





players because maybe they are a little bit more in touch with us and they can directly see where they want to go.

"Maybe that gives them an extra one or two per cent. So it is a little bit easier for these kinds of things, but the facilities at Melwood were also really good.

"It is also brilliant, after such a long time, to have the supporters around us again in the stadiums. We were all really looking forward to having a full stadium again. Last season we played in empty stadiums, but now the fans are back in we can just enjoy football again.

"Playing in empty stadiums is something different. Of course it is still football, but it feels different. It feels more like football when the supporters are there. It gives us extra strength.

"When I scored [against Arsenal at Anfield in 2019] it was a completely different experience to celebrate the goal with the supporters around me than when the stadium was almost empty [for his goal against Wolves last season when 2,000 fans were allowed in]. It makes it more special.

"It is great being back in our stadium playing home Premier League games and trying to make the best out of having our fans back."

Liverpool's fifth consecutive Champions League campaign begins this month with Matip's next appearance in the competition due to be his 20th for Liverpool. He has never scored in the Champions League for the Reds but does have a Champions League final assist to his name after teeing up Divock Origi for his trophy-clincher against Spurs in Madrid in 2019.

At one stage last season it looked like Jürgen Klopp's side might be playing Europa League – or Europa Conference League – football this time around before they rallied to finish third.

Matip missed the run-in through injury, but appreciates the job his team-mates did to ensure the Champions League anthem will continue to ring out at Anfield as Liverpool pursue a seventh European Cup success.

"A big club like Liverpool always wants to be in the Champions League, but sometimes it doesn't go your way. Last season was not our best season, but the boys did it perfectly at the end to secure a finish in a Champions League spot.

"I am happy with that because, like everybody, from being small I have always looked for the Champions League every Tuesday and Wednesday night. I always wanted to play in it and

PLAYING IN EMPTY STADIUMS WAS SOMETHING DIFFERENT – IT FEELS MORE LIKE FOOTBALL WITH THE FANS THERE





HOWEVER YOU START THE SEASON YOU HAVE TO REMAIN CONFIDENT AND BELIEVE IN YOUR TEAM-MATES, ESPECIALLY HERE AT LIVERPOOL BECAUSE WE HAVE SUCH A GREAT GROUP OF PLAYERS

it is important that we are playing in it again this season.

"There are a lot of good teams and we have seen a crazy change with Messi [leaving Barcelona for PSG], but I am happy to play in the Champions League."

Liverpool didn't play in Europe at all during 2016/17, Matip's first season as a Red, but under Klopp they have evolved into a side capable of winning both the Champions League and Premier League. The aim now is to emulate those successes although the Bochum-born defender is under no illusions about how difficult that will be in the face of fierce competition.

"There are so many good teams so you never know how the season will be. When you have so many good teams with so many good players – and different ideas of how they play – it is always quite difficult to assess at the beginning how it will go at the end.

"A win at the beginning is always good for our confidence at the proper start of the season – especially away – and it was important to get three points at Norwich. Results are always the most important thing at the beginning, but if you have a good start or bad start you have to continue.

"It is not the end of the world with a bad start. It is not a guarantee of success with good start.

"You have to remain self-confident and believe in your team-mates, especially here because we have a good team and I am confident we can go forward."

Signed in 2016 from his boyhood club Schalke – the team he still supports – Matip is one of the Reds' longest-serving players. Having been here for half-a-decade, he feels a special connection with the club. He also believes future successes are achievable with this group of players.

"This is my sixth year at Liverpool and, looking backwards, it feels like it has gone in the blink of an eye. My first league game against a strong Tottenham side was really special. Unfortunately it was only a draw, but it was brilliant for me to feel the shirt in a proper game. It's not a great memory that it was a draw, but everybody remembers his first game.

"I am already five years here and you get connected. You feel this amazing club even if you walk through the city. There are so many Liverpool supporters around the world that you just feel how big the club is and how many people love the club in their own special way. You just feel part of a really special thing.

"To be in this environment helps you to grow and it has gone really well – really quickly – and now I hope to enjoy the next years here. I think we are in good shape and we don't have to be afraid of any team, but we have to play our football 100 per cent.

"It will be an intense and interesting season and we have a really good team. If we play at our 100 per cent level we can beat everyone."





NEVER GIF UP

You won't find him on Twitter, Instagram or TikTok, but Joel Matip is something of a social-media cult hero among both Liverpool supporters and his team-mates.

From iconic hand-waving trophy celebrations on podiums to an array of amusing facial expressions and mannerisms that always seem to be caught on camera, he isn't just a top-class defender but a much-loved figure at the club.

The 'No Context Joel Matip' parody Twitter account has over 70,000 followers and Virgil van Dijk buzzes off it so much that he even turned up for the new kit photoshoot a few months ago in one of their tribute t-shirts.

"The legend, one of a kind," he said while pointing at a smiling Matip on his front. "I love the man. He will do so many good GIFS that we can all use and enjoy it."

Joel sees the funny side while also appreciating the support he gets from Liverpool fans. "Virgil and Ali keep me posted with all the updates. Virgil loves this kind of stuff. He's the one who is like, 'Joel, did you see this?' He is normally one of the first who sees things about me and he loves it.

"I'm not really looking at it [social media] but my team-mates always do. They show me the same pictures that everyone sees. They always come onto our [group] chat and some of them are quite funny. I can laugh about myself and I don't know what I'm always doing!

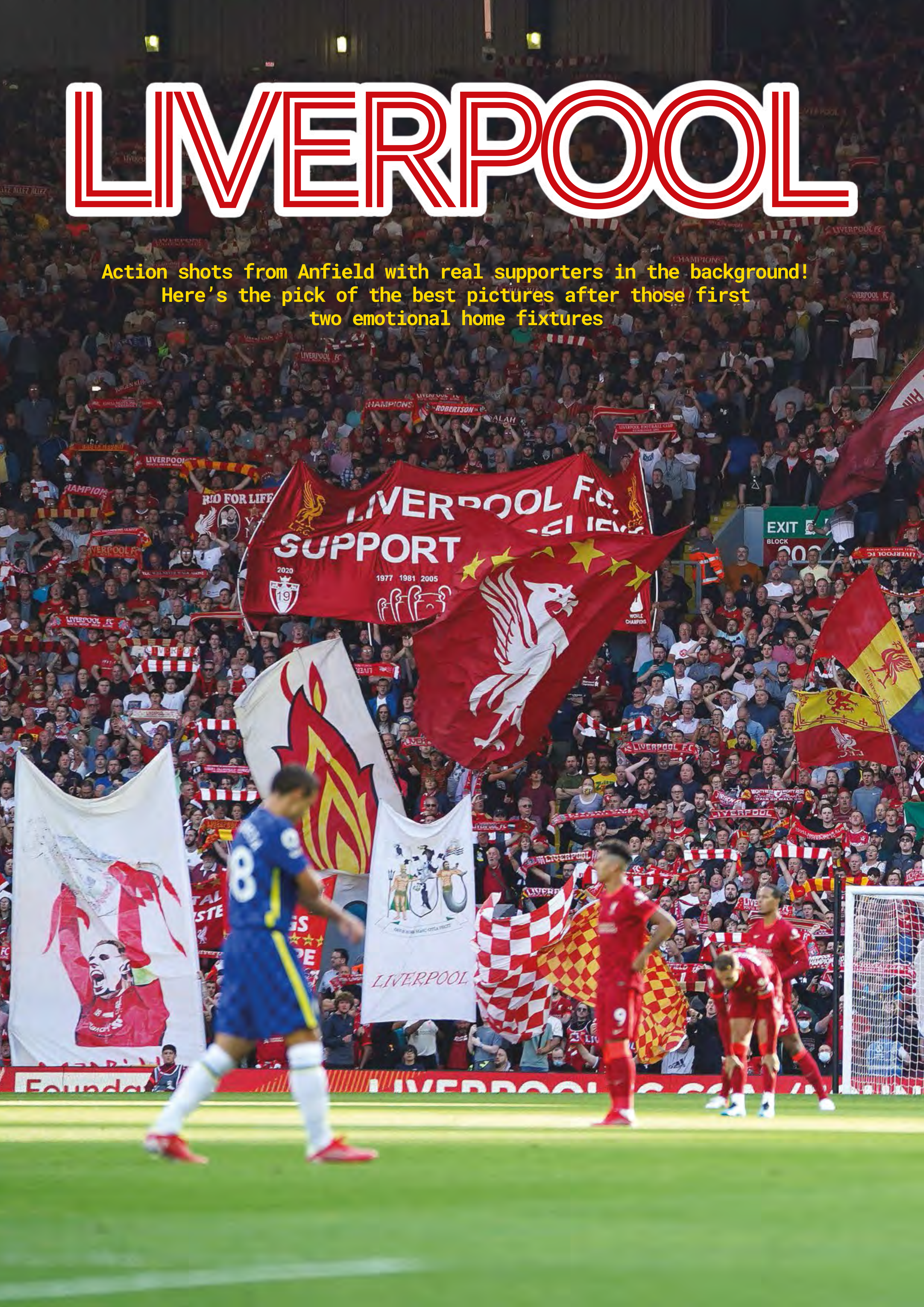
"It seems to be that I'm not always really aware of the cameras that are around me, but I don't really look for them. My mind is always on the game or somewhere else.

"But it is always great to have supporters that like you and support you. It is a great feeling that the people have my back."



LIVERPOOL

Action shots from Anfield with real supporters in the background! Here's the pick of the best pictures after those first two emotional home fixtures



ARE BACK







Two home games, two full houses... Just how good does that sound? At last, after everything we've all been through, Anfield returned to hosting capacity crowds for its first two Premier League fixtures of the season before the opening international break.

If the weather was predictably hit-and-miss for the first of those occasions, the 2-0 victory over Burnley that kicked off at midday, it was wall-to-wall sunshine for the late-afternoon visit of Chelsea in which the points were shared.

There had been no 50,000-plus crowds at Anfield in the Premier League since March 2020 when Bournemouth were the visitors, and of course none since Jürgen Klopp's men were crowned English champions.

Imagine if the Reds were to win that title again, this time in front of all the fans. Anfield has one helluva party still waiting to take place.

In the meantime, in navigating the way through the return to full capacities, the club had been working in line with football's governing bodies, plus city partners Liverpool City Council, Merseyside Police and Spirit of Shankly, to adhere to current guidelines and prioritise the safety of returning supporters, staff, players and local communities.







Following trials of new stadium-entry processes, NFC technology was also being utilised for fans to access the stadium, having downloaded their digital season-tickets to their smartphones. LFC was 'Fan Ready'.

In his matchday programme notes for the Burnley game the manager had written: "You have no idea how good it feels to say, 'Welcome back!' We've missed you like crazy. And a full welcome. A full Anfield. With a full away support. Football is back and it's wonderful."

Before kick-off the 'holy trinity' were reunited through a rousing rendition of You'll Never Walk Alone, the first time a packed Anfield had been able to share in the singing of the famous anthem for almost 18 months.

In the moments before kick-off, Anfield also paid its respects to all those with a Red connection who had passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic. A poignant tribute with a mosaic then saluted Andrew Devine, the 97th person unlawfully killed at Hillsborough, before captain Jordan Henderson laid a wreath in front of the Kop. Then the old Anfield noise kicked in once more.



Afterwards, Virgil van Dijk – himself appearing back at Anfield for the first time since September 2020 – told the club website: "Even with an early kick-off, to see all the fans back is a big buzz – we all enjoy it.

"It's something that hopefully is going to be normal again because we need the fans. Whether it's at home games but also the away games, we need the atmosphere of fans.

"We've seen how football is – it belongs to the fans, with the fans. I'm just glad everyone is back."

Henderson told BT Sport: "It was great to have them back. Without a crowd it's a totally different game – not only at Anfield but in general. Now we've got the fans back and hopefully we can keep our fortress, if you like, and teams won't like coming here."





Between the Burnley and Chelsea games, there was also a new documentary airing on LFCTV entitled *Off To The Match We Go*. In it, fans from across the city and beyond shared their own experiences of the pandemic and explained how their love of the club had helped them cope.

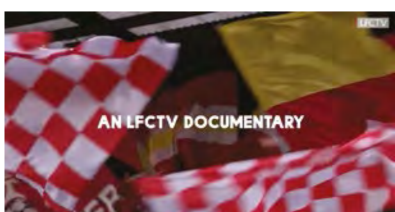
Among those featured was 90-year-old Peggy, who first attended Anfield in 1945 – it had been her longest spell away from the stadium she loves in 75 years – while NHS nurse Jackie Hoare paid tribute to the heroes who were on the frontline, risking their lives to help others, and the Fans Supporting Foodbanks team opened up about their own selfless acts of community action.

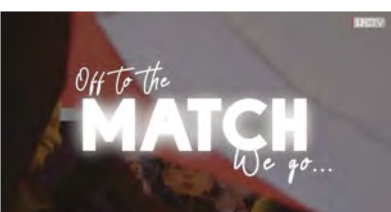
Local pub owners Robbie Rogers and Tage Herstad detailed how the pandemic rocked the surrounding area, while lifelong legendary supporter Jimmy Flowers reflected on the loss of precious matchday routines.

Looking ahead to this season, members of Spion Kop 1906, the Liverpool fan group devoted to organising flag and banner displays at Anfield, set out their plans for the new season, and a return to normality.

Definitely worth a watch, and now available to view on LFCTV GO. It's just like old times...





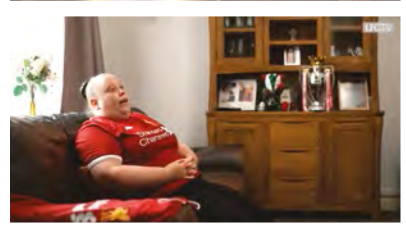



















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"The best players are the ones that do it over and over again"

Trent Alexander-Arnold wants more success to go with his new contract with LFC and is determined to develop a serial winner's mentality

There is an old adage football that you build from the back and judging by this summer's business that's certainly the case for the Reds.

After making an early summer move for RB Leipzig centre-back Ibrahima Konate to add to the strength-in-depth in that position, the Reds agreed fresh terms on extended deals with players who all have strong cases to be considered the best in world football in their respective positions.

Goalkeeper Alisson Becker has become a key figure between the posts since his arrival from AS Roma in 2018, the same summer that saw Fabinho join from AS Monaco and begin to show his qualities as a protective shield in front of the back-line.





Words: William Hughes

Virgil van Dijk is, of course, widely held to be among the best centre-backs of his generation, while Trent Alexander-Arnold and Andy Robertson have helped redefine the full-back role in the modern era.

Skipper Jordan Henderson has become an important leader of this Liverpool team and, like Fabinho, also showed his ability to fill in at centre-back last season.

News of the extended contracts for that sextet of players was widely celebrated by Liverpool supporters and, as one of their own, Alexander-Arnold described his own decision to extend his stay at Anfield as a no-brainer.

"There were never any doubts in my mind about signing a new deal and I don't see why there should have been either," he says. "I'm surrounded by world-class players.

"When I'm in the changing-room and I look round and see the players that I'm able to play with, it's quite difficult to find many other teams that have as many world-class players as we have.



"Then of course, there's the manager and the coaching staff as well, who are also world-class and known for winning trophies.

"So it was never really in doubt. I like to be surrounded by people who have the same goals and aims as me which is to win trophies and I feel as though that's where we're at as a club. We expect ourselves to win trophies and with the players and the staff that we've got then there's no reason why we shouldn't."

The 22-year-old adds that having the opportunity to achieve his ambitions with his boyhood club is something he is especially thankful for.

"That's something that's very special to me. It's the team and the club that is very special to me. I've always supported them and always dreamed of playing for them, so to be playing for the club regularly now is something that I work really hard for.

"Growing up I experienced what it was like to be a fan and then had those bitterly disappointing moments of the team not really being able to win things and having maybe not the best squads and other teams having better players that it was just too hard to compete with.



"But now, being able to compete with anyone and going into seasons knowing that if we have a good season we're able to win the Premier League and the Champions League is amazing. And, for the fans, I think it must fill them with joy knowing that's achievable too."

Trent was pleased to pull on a red shirt again this pre-season after injury denied him the opportunity to sample highs in a white jersey this summer.

After being named in Gareth Southgate's England squad for the Euros, a thigh injury sustained in the warm-up friendly against Austria saw him miss out on the tournament.

"At the back-end of last season I put in a lot of hard work to help the team get into the top four and to be selected for the Euros as well was big for me," he recalls.

"To the miss out through injury was difficult. There was a difficult period for me as soon as it happened. For a few days afterwards it was difficult to take, knowing that I was going to miss out on what was really a home tournament that I won't be able to have back as a player.

"But everything happens for a reason and it wasn't meant to be. It was still good to see the lads do so well but for it to end in disappointment as it did was tough to see.

"I had to move on quite quickly because that's when my rehab started and I needed to get back fit and make sure that I was ready for the start of pre-season and that I got a good solid three or four weeks in with the lads going into the season.

"I worked hard during the off-season with the physios and the medical team here who have been amazing for me. I was counting down the days until I could get back out there.

"I was doing a lot of individual-based sessions in the off-season, working with the medical team every day on-pitch and off-pitch, so I was so excited to meet up with the lads, get back into training, play football again and just enjoy it.

"To come back into pre-season and to hit the ground running was good. Then it was just about working on my fitness and making sure that I was at the level that I needed to be at for the start of the season."

Having also had time to reflect on the difficulties experienced by the team last season, Trent feels the squad is well-placed to learn some lessons and build on the positives.

"I think looking back at it now, we achieved something really good with the way that things were going and the circumstances that we were under," he continues. "To come third in the Premier League considering how things went with the injuries and so

"IT'S THE TEAM AND THE CLUB THAT IS VERY SPECIAL TO ME. I'VE ALWAYS SUPPORTED THEM AND ALWAYS DREAMED OF PLAYING FOR THEM, SO TO BE PLAYING FOR THE CLUB REGULARLY NOW IS SOMETHING THAT I WORK REALLY HARD FOR"



on was very good for us. Of course at the start of that season we obviously wanted to win things, so to have a year where we didn't win anything was still a disappointment.

"There were a lot of road-bumps along the way for us. There was no real consistency but a lot of people forget that the first half of the season was really good. We went into Christmas top of the league.

"But then after the turn of the year we had no real good run of form and that did for us. The games come thick-and-fast in that period and if you lose form, it can hurt you massively. Over the space of three or four weeks, people can pick up 12 to 15 points so it was a difficult time for us and going into the March internationals I think we were eighth.

"At that point you re-evaluate what your targets for the season are and obviously they'd changed from being able to win the league to just securing top four if we could and, if not, just Europe. So to come third in the end was an amazing achievement, I thought.

"There was a lot said about the number of different partnerships we had at centre-back and it's difficult when you have to change any system and any group of players but especially within a back-four.

"You want that stability of always playing with a set back-four that know each other, understand each other's movements and where they are and it just becomes second nature in that sense.

"So when it's chopped-and-changed and it's in-and-out and a lot of new faces and people that you've not really played with before, it is difficult.

"But I think if you look towards the back-end of last season when we had a more stable back-four with me, Rhys, Nat and Robbo, we started to keep clean-sheets, looked more solid defensively and it was what we needed to help us reach the Champions League."

Williams and Phillips were also rewarded for their efforts with extended deals and with most of the injured players now back again, Trent believes this season will be a more positive one for the Reds.

"The aim is always to win trophies," he says. "I think with the group of players that we've got, the manager and the fans being back – which is a huge boost for us – there's no real reason for us not to achieve silverware whether that be the league, Champions League or a cup competition or maybe even a couple of them.

"We've got the players who are able to do that and it's just

"THE AIM IS ALWAYS TO WIN TROPHIES. WITH THE GROUP OF PLAYERS THAT WE'VE GOT, THE MANAGER AND THE FANS BEING BACK - WHICH IS A HUGE BOOST FOR US - THERE'S NO REAL REASON FOR US NOT TO ACHIEVE SILVERWARE"




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about whether we can pick up the results along the way.

"It's going to be a long season but obviously we've done it before so there's no reason why we can't do it again."

The no66 also points to the fact that there haven't been dramatic changes to the personnel who ended the club's 30-year wait for a league title in 2019/20.

"The fact that we know each other really well should help us. We're a tight group of lads and we've bonded really well over the last few years, over the successes and the hard times, so we've grown together, we've evolved, we've become better as individuals and as a team and we've achieved things that we've set out to.

"So as a team we know what we can do, we know how to do it, it's just about making sure we're on it throughout the whole season."

As referenced earlier Trent believes it is hard to underestimate the impact having fans back inside Anfield will have on himself and the rest of the team.

"I think that will be huge. You could tell last year that it

"IT'S ALSO ABOUT THE JOURNEY TOO. IT'S THE HARD WORK THAT YOU PUT IN DURING PRE-SEASON, IT'S THE TOUGH GAMES THAT YOU GRIND OUT AWAY FROM HOME, THE ONE-NIL WINS, THE TOUGH GAMES THAT YOU WIN, THE ONES THAT REALLY MATTER AGAINST YOUR RIVALS...EVERYTHING THAT GOES INTO THE SEASON"





impacted us probably more than any other team. The results we were picking up were not good enough at home and I think the lack of fans played a big part in that.

"To have them back was exciting to think about during pre-season and it's something that we all couldn't wait for and was another reason why we were all very excited going into the season.

"We've had a tough start but the atmospheres at all three of the games ahead of the international break have been fantastic, especially against Burnley and Chelsea at Anfield. We have made a decent start with being unbeaten in August and hopefully now we can push on."

Despite having achieved so much in the game at such a tender age, Trent says his hunger to win more and more trophies will never be satisfied.

"I think the best players are the ones that do it over and over and over again. They are the ones that win it multiple times and never get bored or tired of winning. So that feeling of winning something will never get boring to me and that always motivates me.

"It's also about the journey too. It's the hard work that you put in during pre-season, it's the tough games that you grind out away from home, the one-nil wins, the tough games that you win, the ones that really matter against your rivals...everything that goes into the season.

"That just makes it so special when it comes to the end, knowing that you've earned it.

"It doesn't matter how other teams perform or if people say, 'Oh, you're lucky'. To win the Premier League, it's 38 games, not four or five where you maybe have a stretch of luck with scoring last-minute winners or benefit from own-goals.

"You've got to be consistent over 38 games and the team that's most consistent always wins.

"So it's important for us to make sure that we're as consistent as we can be throughout the season and make sure we're picking up wins when we can."

HAIR TODAY...

Trent was pictured with a braided hairstyle during the summer but reported back for training with his familiar style back in place.

Having asked his Instagram followers whether or not he should keep the new look, Jordan Henderson and Andy Robertson were among those to respond and his team-mates made their views on the matter quite clear.

However, Trent is keen to insist that he did not bow to peer pressure! "No, not at all! To be honest it was always a decision I was going to make. I probably just wanted a bit of interaction to see what people were thinking about it and those two nibbled massively on it!

"It was just a bit of fun. I was growing it and then I just wanted to change it up for the summer but my intention was always to change it back when I came back to football. So no, I didn't bottle it!"





YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE
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WHEN JÜRGEN MET ARSENE

At the AXA Training Centre a legendary former Premier League boss brought special gifts for the Reds manager and his players



Last month saw one of the modern managerial greats, Arsene Wenger, warmly welcomed to the AXA Training Centre to present FIFA awards to Jürgen Klopp and four members of his Liverpool squad.

The former Arsenal boss, now FIFA's chief of global football development, handed over the 2020 Best FIFA Men's Coach prize to Klopp.

Meanwhile he gave Alisson Becker, Trent Alexander-Arnold, Virgil van Dijk and Thiago Alcantara trophies to mark their inclusion in the 2020 FIFA FIFPro Men's World 11.

Arsene and Jürgen chatted while watching a session at the AXA Training Centre and the former also caught up with Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, whom he coached at Arsenal between 2011 and 2017.

Upon receiving his accolade, Klopp paid tribute to his squad: "Without the boys, the players, it would not have been possible. Arsene Wenger said it exactly right when he asked: what do you have to be, to be a good coach? He said it at the end but I think it helps in the beginning as well. A world-class team helps! And I have that, thank God."

The Reds boss continued: "I work in a sensational club, get all the support I need, have only great people around me.

"So we come here, even in difficult times, every day with a smile on our face.

"It all makes it easier and makes it possible. I said a couple of times, I'm not the biggest believer in these kind of individual awards for coaches but we just take it for all of us.

"One face gets the prize but it's for all of us – and I'm really proud of that."







Liverpool and Bayern Munich dominate the current FIFA FIFPRO Men's World 11 – a special team carefully selected by their peers in the game. Along with Alisson, Trent and Virgil, there are four players who won last season's UEFA Champions League with Bayern: Thiago, before his move to LFC, plus Alphonso Davies, Robert Lewandowski and Joshua Kimmich. This is the 16th Men's World 11, having been created by FIFA in 2005. A total of 15,878 male professional footballers participated in the vote.

For the fourteenth consecutive year, Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi were selected, while Alisson and Van Dijk collected their second award. Virgil is the first Dutch player to collect more than one World 11 award.

FIFPRO and FIFA invited all professional footballers worldwide to vote for the World 11. They asked them to pick the most outstanding players in the following lines: goalkeepers, defenders, midfielders and forwards.

The goalkeeper, as well as the three defenders, three midfielders and three forwards who received the most votes were selected for the World 11. The remaining spot in the World 11 was assigned to the outfield player with the next highest number of votes.

2019/2020 FIFA FIFPRO MEN'S WORLD 11

Player (current team/last season's team, country)



GOALKEEPER

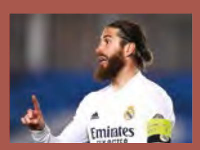


Alisson Becker
(Liverpool, Brazil)

DEFENDERS



Trent Alexander-Arnold
(Liverpool, England)



Sergio Ramos
(PSG/Real Madrid, Spain)



Virgil van Dijk
(Liverpool, Netherlands)



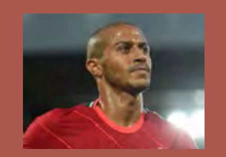
Alphonso Davies
(Bayern Munich, Canada)

MIDFIELDERS

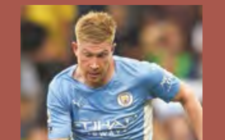


Joshua Kimmich
(Bayern Munich, Germany)

MIDFIELDERS



Thiago Alcantara
(Liverpool/Bayern Munich, Spain)



Kevin De Bruyne
(Manchester City, Belgium)

FORWARDS



Cristiano Ronaldo
(Man United/Juventus, Portugal)

FORWARDS



Robert Lewandowski
(Bayern Munich, Poland)

Lionel Messi
(PSG/Barcelona, Argentina)


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TIME FOR THIAGO

Catching up with the midfield maestro as he prepares for his first season with full-houses at Anfield

THIAGO, HOPEFULLY THERE WILL BE LESS UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THIS SEASON THAN LAST WITH THE COVID-19 SITUATION, FANS IN AND OUT OF THE GROUNDS AND THE CLUB'S INJURY LIST...

To be honest, I don't think there was uncertainty going into the season at a similar period to where we are now. It was just that things happened throughout the season where we had to improvise due to injuries, the COVID situation too and, in the end, we didn't have a full-strength team on all fronts over the season.

They weren't little injuries either, they were significant injuries to leaders who were out of the team. Experienced players. And in the end the season didn't turn out how we'd have liked it to. But even though it wasn't the season we wanted and we didn't play exactly how we wanted, we did end up finishing third in the Premier League and reaching the Champions League.





I AM NOW LIKE A KID WITH A NEW TOY! WE HAVE THE FANS AGAIN IN THE STADIUM AND I HAD BEEN REALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO PLAYING IN FRONT OF THEM

YOU MENTION SOME OF THOSE INJURIES – HOW BIG A MISS WAS VIRGIL VAN DIJK LAST SEASON?

Well, as a player for this team and a fan of this team, we know that Virg is a leader and a main player for us. I think his injury, like Joe's and Joel's, were very big to us in the moment and we had to improvise a bit during the season, but in the end the young lads did an amazing job there.

But he is a great leader and a great player with a huge heart, so we missed him a lot. From my own perspective too, it was a pity that I didn't play that much with him last year but I am looking forward to hopefully changing that this season.

HIS RETURN HAS OBVIOUSLY GIVEN EVERYONE A HUGE LIFT IN THE EARLY WEEKS OF THIS CAMPAIGN…

Yes, it's a great boost for us. Having Joel and Joe back too. After long injuries like theirs, first of all you are happy personally for them. After all their struggles and what they have been doing in the daytime to reach the level to play again.

So we are very happy for them and for us and it's a big boost of energy for the team as well.



HOW DIFFICULT IS IT TO GET BACK TO 100 PER CENT AFTER A LONG INJURY?

In the end, Virgil's experienced enough to know what his body is telling him. It's a case of, 'Okay, now I have to stop a bit,' or 'Now I have to give it a bit of gas'. You can control that kind of thing during a rehab period from injury and I think he is very clever in knowing the new steps he can take. And, of course, we also have an amazing medical team to help him with those steps.

THIS IS YOUR SECOND SEASON IN THE PREMIER LEAGUE – HOW EXCITED ARE YOU ABOUT IT?

Well, I am now like a kid with a new toy! We have the fans again in the stadium as well and I had been really looking forward to playing in front of them.

Playing at Anfield with our crowd will give us that extra energy and it was great to do that against Burnley and Chelsea and now I am looking forward to the rest of the games with their amazing support.

OF THE NINE LEAGUE DEFEATS LAST SEASON, SIX CAME AT HOME SO HOPEFULLY HAVING CAPACITY CROWDS BACK INSIDE ANFIELD CAN HELP THE TEAM IMPROVE THAT STATISTIC TOO…

Yes. Out of those nine defeats, if we look back on all of the games, there weren't many we deserved to lose in my opinion. So I think ultimately, at the top level, there are small details in football where we need to be more clinical and stronger during certain moments in the game in order to give ourselves a greater advantage. Obviously the more chances you create, the more goals you can score.

DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE GOING INTO A SEASON AS CHALLENGERS RATHER THAN CHAMPIONS?

I don't think it changes anything, to be honest. The good thing with this team is that we have the hunger and the desire to win it year after year. That's our main goal.

It doesn't change anything from the last year in terms of objectives. We just want to have that feeling again, that amazing experience of winning the Premier League.

THERE IS ONE NEW FACE TOO IN IBRAHIMA KONATE – WHAT HAVE YOU MADE OF HIM?

Well, he's a young centre-back with a lot of ability. He's strong, he has a great sense of humour, but he's only been here a few months so I've not got to know him on a personal level that well yet. But on a professional level I've played against him on various occasions in Germany and he's a wonderful player.

ONE YEAR ON, HOW IS YOUR ADAPTATION TO ENGLAND GOING?

Well, more than anything, I'm getting to know my team-mates better, to know how they play, and understanding the pace of the Premier League. But I think a new chapter started when the fans returned to the Premier League and there will is a new energy which I was desperate to see and one we got a taste of in those final two league games of last season [against Burnley and Crystal Palace] too.

YOU SCORED YOUR FIRST GOAL FOR LIVERPOOL AGAINST SOUTHAMPTON LAST SEASON AT THE KOP END. WHAT ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF IT?

We were winning 1-0 and controlling the match and the game had become open because Southampton were looking to create chances. So, we won the ball down the right hand side, Bobby [Firmino] carried it forward, I made a run down the middle and Bobby played the ball to me.

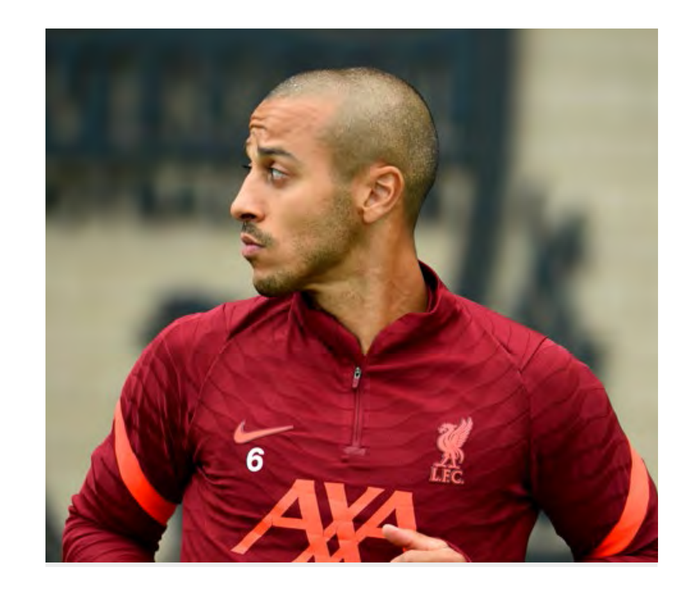
As I controlled it, I managed to go past a centre-back. That left me just outside the area and I placed it past the keeper. It was my first goal and I hope it will be the first of many.

YOU REMEMBER IT WELL!

That's because it wasn't long ago! It was one of the last few games of the last Premier League season. Also you remember it because it was your first.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR ONE WISH FOR THIS SEASON?

Well, if I could wish for a number of things within one sentence it would be to win a number of trophies with Liverpool.




Premier League

SO LONG SHAQ

He was never quite a regular but Xherdan Shaqiri's magic moments in a Liverpool shirt most definitely add up

Words: Chris McLoughlin

“Tell him I said hello,” laughed Xherdan Shaqiri as he received the Premier League man-of-the-match award from Liverpool legend Jamie Carragher live on Sky Sports Super Sunday.

The Swiss international winger had just come off the bench to net twice in nine minutes at Anfield to give the Reds a 3-1 win in a pulsating encounter against Manchester United.

It was a particularly sweet moment for Shaqiri as six months earlier, ahead of his move to Merseyside from Stoke City, he had come in for fierce criticism from Carragher’s colleague Gary Neville.

“I’m not a fan of Shaqiri, to be honest with you,” he said during ITV’s coverage of a Switzerland game at the 2018 World Cup. He ended with: “With him, players like that I can’t have, I struggle with it.”

So when Shaqiri struck twice to see off United in December 2018 – with Neville in the Anfield commentary box – Carragher couldn’t resist making a mischievous comment when handing over the MOTM award: “Gary Neville was going to give it to you, but he didn’t want to come down and face you.”

You can rest assured that he passed on that ‘Hello’ message to Neville, who also had to wear a signed ‘SHAQIRI 23’ shirt on Sky Sports Monday Night Football after losing a bet to Carragher.

Shaqiri was only on the pitch for 20 minutes against United, but his double-strike will be remembered by most Kopites as the 29-year-old’s most famous contribution during his three-season spell as a Red. Yet it was far from his only moment.

A crowd of 101,254 fans inside Michigan’s ‘Big House’ witnessed Shaqiri announce himself as a Liverpool player in July 2018.

Jürgen Klopp’s Reds were already on their summer tour of North America, playing in the International Champions Cup, when Shaqiri completed his move from relegated Stoke. He jetted out to the USA to join his new team-mates and after four days of training was brought on for the second half of a clash with Manchester United.



Within 20 minutes he had an assist, teeing up Daniel Sturridge to net, and in the 82nd minute he wowed the 100,000-plus crowd in Ann Arbor by meeting Ben Woodburn’s cross with a flying bicycle-kick that rocketed into the net to complete a 4-1 win.

“I love bicycle kicks,” he said afterwards. “It was a very beautiful goal.”

Xherdan also gave his first interview as a Liverpool player that week. In it he responded to questions about whether he’d be able to force his way into the team and outlined his ambitions at LFC.

“In football there are challenges everywhere,” he said. “Of course Liverpool have top players – very good players, young players. It’s difficult for everybody but I’m very glad to be here and I believe in myself.

OBVIOUSLY I WANT TO SCORE IN EVERY GAME BUT WHEN YOU SCORE AGAINST BIG TEAMS IT IS ALWAYS NICE. I WILL TRY TO SCORE AGAINST MANCHESTER UNITED AGAIN, BUT I WANT TO SCORE AGAINST EVERY TEAM

"The most important thing is to be a team and win as a team. There aren't only eleven players on the pitch – it's more than eleven players who win titles. I'm really pleased to be here and I want to show myself.

"A big point for me to come here was the coach. I love his football, how he plays and how he manages a team. I was always an admirer of his. He's a big personality.

"Since he came here you can see how the team has progressed. They are in the best way to win titles and that's why I'm here – I want to win titles. I think we can achieve a lot."

He got that right and Shaqiri played his part in a thrilling 2018/19 campaign. His debut came as a substitute in a 4-0 Anfield win against West Ham United and in September 2018 he made his first start at home to Southampton.

His early shot deflected off Shane Long and struck Wesley Hoedt for an own-goal and only the crossbar prevented Shaq from marking that milestone with a goal from a direct free-kick. His effort from 25 yards thumped the crossbar but led to an inadvertent assist as Mo Salah tapped home the rebound.

Contribution made, Shaqiri was replaced by James Milner at half-time and Liverpool won 3-0, giving the impression that the man nicknamed Der Kraftwurfel (the Powercube) by fans at former club Bayern Munich was something of a power-play player for Klopp.

A month later he came off the bench to net his first Liverpool goal against Cardiff City, showing quick feet to shimmy past two Bluebirds defenders in the box before slotting home.

A close-range finish against Fulham at Anfield was followed by a memorable strike at Burnley when an end-to-end Liverpool counter-attack in the 90th minute resulted in Shaqiri finishing from Salah's pass to give the Reds a 3-1 win.

His trademark 'arms-folded' celebration in front of a bouncing travelling Kop was a moment to cherish.

That game at Turf Moor was played eleven days before Manchester United visited Anfield. Ahead of it, Shaqiri was asked in an interview for the official matchday programme if the Red Devils might be a lucky club for him, having scored so spectacularly against them in pre-season.

"I hope so," he replied. "Obviously I want to score in every game but when you score against big teams it is always nice. I will try to score against Manchester United again, but I want to score against every team.

"Of course, I want to make a good performance first, but I want to make an impact – to score some goals and make assists."

Although both of his goals in Liverpool's subsequent 3-1 win took deflections – the first rattling the underside of David de Gea's bar on the way in – Shaqiri wrote his name into Anfield folklore that afternoon.

He joined Nigel Clough (1993), Robbie Fowler (1995), Michael Owen (2001) and Dirk Kuyt (2011) as the only men to have scored more than once in a home game against our biggest rivals during the 30-year Premier League era.

A Boxing Day goal at home to Newcastle United was Shaqiri's





last of the season, but when May came around he played a crucial creative role as Liverpool went into the final month of the season a point behind leaders Manchester City in the Premier League – with two games to play – and facing Barcelona in the last four of the Champions League.

After a 3-0 first leg defeat at Camp Nou, the Reds went to St James' Park knowing anything less than three points against the Newcastle United would end their title challenge.

With four minutes to play, the scoreline locked at 2-2 and Salah off with concussion, Shaqiri whipped a free-kick in the Newcastle penalty box. Divock Origi rose like a salmon to flick a header home and keep the title race alive.

Salah's concussion and an injury to Roberto Firmino meant the pair both started 'mission impossible' against Barcelona in the Champions League semi-final second leg. Beating Messi, Suarez, Coutinho and co 4-0 without Salah and Firmino may have seemed unlikely, but This Is Anfield.

Origi's early goal gave the Reds hope and Gini Wijnaldum made it 2-0 early in the second half. Moments later another gem of a left-footed cross from Shaqiri was headed home by Wijnaldum and Barca's heads went. While they were still spinning, Trent Alexander-Arnold took a corner quickly and Origi sent the Reds to Madrid.

"Difficult to speak now after what happened tonight here," an emotional Shaqiri told the club website at full-time. "Unbelievable performance, unbelievable fans – they pushed us.

"I never saw this in my life. It was something special tonight, a special night at Anfield definitely. It's crazy, it's crazy, it's unbelievable what we achieved today. It's difficult to speak about this crazy game because we are still full of adrenaline in our bodies, celebrating.

"I'm just really proud of this team, for these fans – they push us all year. All year they are behind this club and the fans are something really special. I saw people crying and that's given me something special."

Liverpool narrowly missed out on winning the Premier League title five days later. A club-record 97 points after a 2-0 win against Wolves wasn't quite enough to pip City, but on 1 June 2019 the Reds put that behind them in Madrid.

Liverpool 2 Tottenham Hotspur 0. We won it six times.

Just like at the end of his first season with Bayern Munich in 2013, Shaqiri was a Champions League winner. Only this time he was part of Klopp's squad rather than being an opponent, Bayern having beaten Jürgen's Borussia Dortmund at Wembley six years earlier.

Three other pieces of silverware followed for Liverpool and Shaqiri in season 2019/20. As he had been in Madrid, he was an unused substitute when the Redmen beat Chelsea on penalties to lift the UEFA Super Cup in Istanbul following a 2-2 draw. He did, however, play in both games as Liverpool landed the club's historic first FIFA Club World Cup crown in Qatar.

IT'S MORE THAN 11 PLAYERS WHO WIN TITLES

Shaqiri started the semi-final against CF Monterrey and came on in the 1-0 final victory against Flamengo. It completed a memorable December for Shaqiri as earlier in the month he'd been a surprise starter in the Merseyside derby at Anfield, but marked the occasion with a goal – a sliding finish from Sadio Mane's pass – as Liverpool thrashed Everton 5-2.

It was his only goal of an injury-hit campaign, but with seven Premier League appearances under his belt he qualified for a winner's medal as the Reds ended a 30-year wait to become champions.

Shaq made another 22 appearances last season and netted once – a dipping free-kick from a wide angle to open the scoring in a 7-2 Carabao Cup win at Lincoln City. He also chalked up four assists – two in the FA Cup at Aston Villa and two in the Premier League versus West Ham United.

His Anfield assist against the Hammers was a deft reverse-pass to nutmeg Fabian Balbuena and send Diogo Jota through to strike an 86th-minute winner, while at the London Stadium it was from Shaqiri's first-time, lofted pass that Salah produced an exquisite piece of control-and-finish to score one of the finest counter-attacking goals the Premier League has ever seen.

And that probably best sums up Shaqiri's Anfield career. The stats show that only 25 of his 63 Liverpool games were starts with 38 appearances coming from the bench. But eight goals and nine assists is proof that Big Shaq – who bought into Jürgen Klopp's philosophy of team over individual – contributed when he played. As he said himself, "It's more than 11 players who win titles."

Xherdan Shaqiri won four major trophies in three seasons as a Liverpool player and scored against Everton and Manchester United at Anfield. If any Olympique Lyonnais fans happen to be reading to get the lowdown on your new signing, do us a favour. Tell him we said hello.

"I WILL MISS YOU"

Shaq made this post on his Instagram Stories after completing his transfer to Lyon.



SHAQ'S STATS

Season	Apps	Goals	Assists	Trophies
2018/19	30	6	5	1
2019/20	11	1	0	3
2020/21	22	1	4	0


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DIFFERENT BALL GAME

Looks like the lads are as fiercely competitive at table-tennis as they are on the football pitch… well, most of the time!

While Mo Salah was celebrating a third table-tennis success in the pre-season LFC doubles tournament in Evian, left-hander Harvey Elliott was a picture of concentration

Virgil got his teeth into the tournament, but his bat-holding technique wasn't great





Alisson chose not to wear his goalie gloves but his racket was still in safe hands

Is Bobby trying a mic drop there or what?

Kostas Tsimikas keeps his eyes on the yellow ping-pong ball, which they presumably use in the winter months



James Milner dives in front of team-mate Pep Lijnders like a Yorkshire Superman trying to prevent his last teabag dropping on the kitchen floor

Thiago is so good he plays table-tennis with one hand and rock-paper-scisssors with the other at the same time

Ever the shy, retiring type, Robbo quietly celebrates a winning shot



Curtis Jones is said to have epic table-tennis matches against Trent Alexander-Arnold and he looks like he means business

Diogo Jota demonstrates 'the claw' – a psychological ping-pong technique that frightens opponents when he plays

He's yet to hit the net for LFC and he doesn't hit the net at table-tennis very often either – Joe Gomez is one of the best ping-pongers in the Reds' squad



The Egyptian Ping – Mo Salah and partner Matt McCann from the club's media team were on fire

Running down the ping, Mane. While the Ox brings his tekkers to the table

Joel B-atip shows off his ping-pong technique but it was Caoimhin Kelleher who played his way to the final



Jürgen was paired with Takumi Minamino and they both looked pretty happy with that, as did Trent

Virgil played well and Jürgen looks like he won, but Mo Salah and Matt McCann beat Caoihmin Kelleher and club psychologist Lee Richardson to take the honours in the final

RONNIE WHELAN

ALL THE BEST

Legendary Reds midfielder
Ronnie Whelan turns 60 on 25 September.
Over a 13-year career with
LFC he won six top-flight titles,
one European Cup and five domestic cups,
and made almost 500 appearances.
He was talented, tigerish and tireless,
and one begs to wonder how much he
would cost in today's money…



Celebrating a late equaliser at home to QPR in September 1984, a 20-yarder on 82 minutes in his fourth full season in the side. By then, three weeks short of his 23rd birthday, he'd already won three top-flight titles, three League Cups and one European Cup.

At Anfield in February 1981 with fellow Reds prospect and Irish youth international Kevin Sheedy, who would leave for Everton the following year. Ronnie had joined the Reds in 1979 from Dublin club Home Farm. "A scout in Ireland told Liverpool he'd never seen a 16 or 17-year-old able to look after themselves so well on the pitch and that they should sign me."

Winning the midfield battle against Tottenham Hotspur in the Charity Shield at Wembley in August 1982. Six months earlier (below right) he'd scored twice against Spurs in the League Cup final. "I was so over the moon after getting my second that I ran over the running track to celebrate with our fans. Only when I got there did I realise it was such a long way back to the pitch and I was so tired that I barely made it. It was a magical day, and special as it was my first major medal."

On the ball against Ipswich Town in February 1982 – he'd score the final goal in a 4-0 win.

Shooting against Sunderland in an FA Cup fourth-round tie in January 1982, of which The Guardian noted: "The 20-year-old Irishman played the closest to a libero role as one will see in British football."

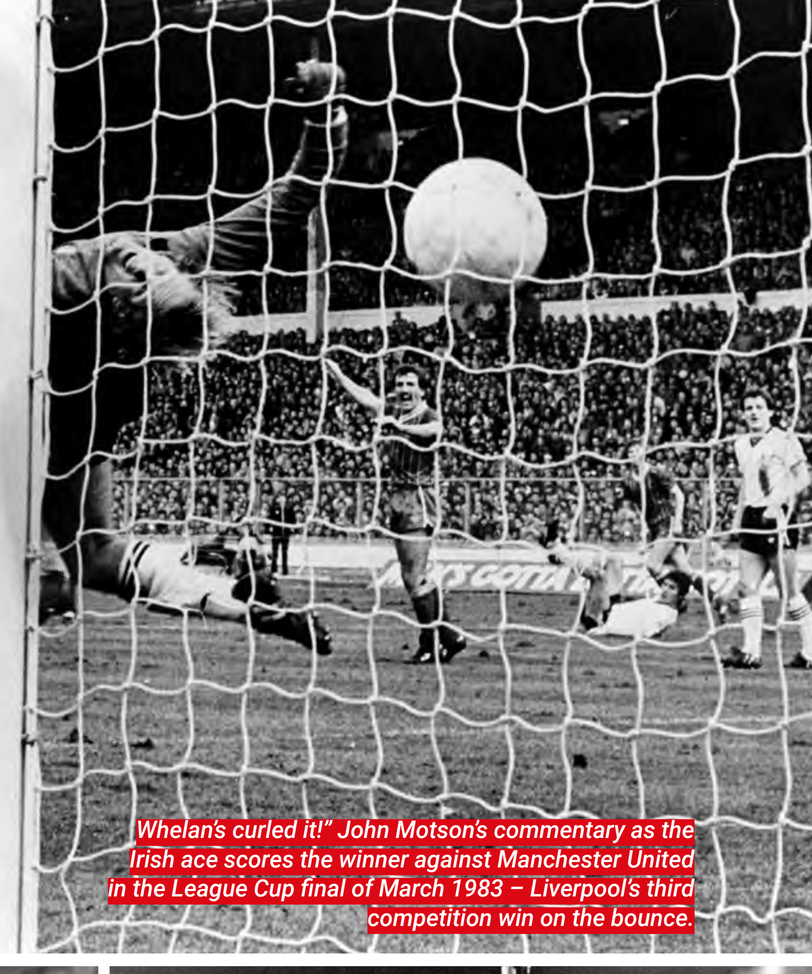


Title-winner with another prodigy, Ian Rush, in May 1982



With the 81/82 League Championship trophy, just tossed to him by skipper Graeme Souness, after scoring against Spurs in a 3-1 title-clincher.





Whelan's curled it!" John Motson's commentary as the Irish ace scores the winner against Manchester United in the League Cup final of March 1983 – Liverpool's third competition win on the bounce.

Liverpool stormed to the 1981/82 title with eleven successive victories between March and May and Ronnie played in them all, scoring four times, including a thumping left-footed half-volley past former Reds keeper Ray Clemence in that Anfield finale against Tottenham.

"Ronnie is a two-footed player," said manager Bob Paisley. "It's a rare gift to be able to dribble the ball with two feet, or play it comfortably whichever side it comes to you. And he's a very sweet striker of a ball – it really pings off his foot like a well-timed shot in golf or tennis."







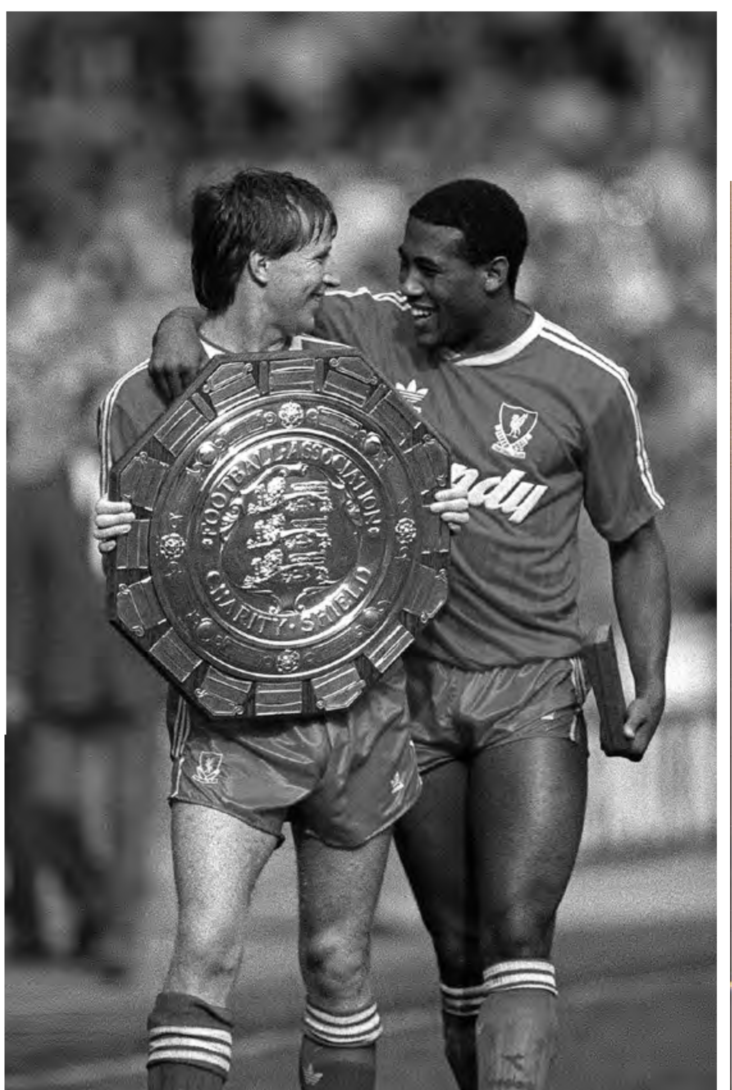
Scoring in a 2-0 win at Walsall in the second leg of the League Cup semi-final in February 1984, having netted twice in the first leg at Anfield.

Chaired off the pitch by jubilant fans after Liverpool's victory over Everton in the League Cup final replay at Maine Road, Manchester, in March 1984.

Driving forward against Sunderland at Anfield in September 1984, with midfield mate Jan Molby looking on



On the Wembley pitch after the 1986 FA Cup final victory over Everton, the first of three such winner's medals he'd add to his collection.



With John Barnes and the Charity Shield trophy in August 1988. "A lot of people said I would be on my way when John came but Kenny Dalglish moved me back into the centre. Those were my best years – I loved playing there, being involved all the time."

Shooting against Brentford in an FA Cup sixth-round tie in March 1989. Three years later he'd score a dramatic semi-final equaliser (below) against Portsmouth at Highbury, having previously done so against Manchester United in 1985.





On the weights at Melwood in 1992, two years before his departure. "You look at former players on Sky picking the best players they ever played with," he recently said. "Graeme Souness put me in his team, so did others because they know what I did when I played."



5 MINUTES WITH....

Caoimhin Kelleher

The Reds goalie nicknamed 'The Octopus' faces a few rapid-fire questions from the magazine's Chris McLoughlin

WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO MAKE YOUR REPUBLIC OF IRELAND INTERNATIONAL DEBUT AGAINST HUNGARY?
It was a good moment for me and obviously a proud moment to make my international debut. It's something I'd dreamt of since I was a young boy and I was really happy. I played well in the game too, which is the main thing, so it was a good moment.

IS IT DIFFERENT TO PLAYING FOR LIVERPOOL?
It's a bit different to playing for Liverpool. There's a different style compared to playing for Liverpool, but I felt quite comfortable so in that sense it was quite similar.







HOW DOES INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL HELP YOUR DEVELOPMENT?

I think it boosts your confidence playing international football, having played for my club as well. It was a big step for me to make and to make that step you've got to be doing well for your club. So to get recognition at international level was the next step for me, really, and I was happy to make my debut for my country.

DID YOU ENJOY THE PRE-SEASON TRAINING CAMP IN AUSTRIA AND FRANCE?

It was really good. It was four weeks we spent there and it gave us lots of time to work on tactics and different stuff. We had a lot of time together to do some good team bonding as well and it was a really good trip overall.

ON ONE LFCTV VIDEO WE SAW YOU GETTING PEPPERED WITH SHOTS IN SHOOTING PRACTICE. DO YOU ENJOY THOSE TRAINING DRILLS?

I love the shooting sessions, it's a good challenge for goalkeepers and I could do it all day. It's good practice – the best practice you can get for mirroring game situations – and I really enjoyed it to be fair.

YOU MADE SO MANY SAVES THAT JAMES MILNER NICKNAMED YOU 'THE OCTOPUS'. GOOD TO HEAR?

It was quite a compliment, but the senior players are quite complimentary here. They'll let you know if you're doing well and that's good because it boosts your confidence as well when you hear players of their stature giving you praise.

LOOKING FORWARD TO PLAYING IN FRONT OF CROWDS AGAIN?

It'll be great, I can't wait for it. We got a taste of it with the two friendlies at Anfield and it was great having the fans back after so long. It felt really good – much better – and after last season with no fans it's that extra bit special to have them back at Anfield. I can't wait for my next game in front of the fans.

AS THE GOALKEEPER HOW MUCH DO YOU HEAR FROM SUPPORTERS BEHIND YOU AT GAMES?

I suppose I can hear a bit, but I mainly hear the noise rather than anything any one person shouts. It's just amazing to hear the atmosphere again because Anfield is a special place and when I played against Osasuna I was buzzing.





YOU'VE NOT YET PLAYED FOR LIVERPOOL WITH VIRGIL VAN DIJK IN FRONT OF YOU, BUT WHAT IS IT LIKE HAVING HIM BACK?
Everyone knows he's quality – he's the best defender in the world – and it's great to have him back. Obviously he had a lengthy injury so we're all buzzing to see him back in training. He's worked really hard to get back – as have the other boys who had injuries – and obviously it's really good news for us.

YOU'VE GOT A NEW TEAM-MATE IN IBRAHIMA KONATE. HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO BUILD AN UNDERSTANDING WITH A NEW CENTRE-BACK?
It does take time, but I think that's what pre-season was good for. We really had a lot of time to spend with each other and get to know his game, how he plays and get comfortable with that.

THE LIKES OF YOURSELF, CURTIS JONES, NECO WILLIAMS AND RHYS WILLIAMS ALL PLAYED FIRST-TEAM FOOTBALL LAST SEASON. HOW PLEASING IS IT TO SEE FELLOW ACADEMY GRADUATES COME THROUGH THE RANKS?
I always like to see young players come through from the Academy and play in the first-team because I was an Academy player myself. I love to see them get the opportunity and when they're doing well I just feel made up for them. They're all great lads and they all work really hard so when they do get an opportunity it's really good to see.

HOW MUCH DIFFERENT IS TRAINING AT THE AXA TRAINING CENTRE TO MELWOOD?
There's a lot more stuff at the AXA Training Centre – top of the range facilities, which does help performance. It's been a boost to all of us, really, with such good facilities. It's definitely helped us.

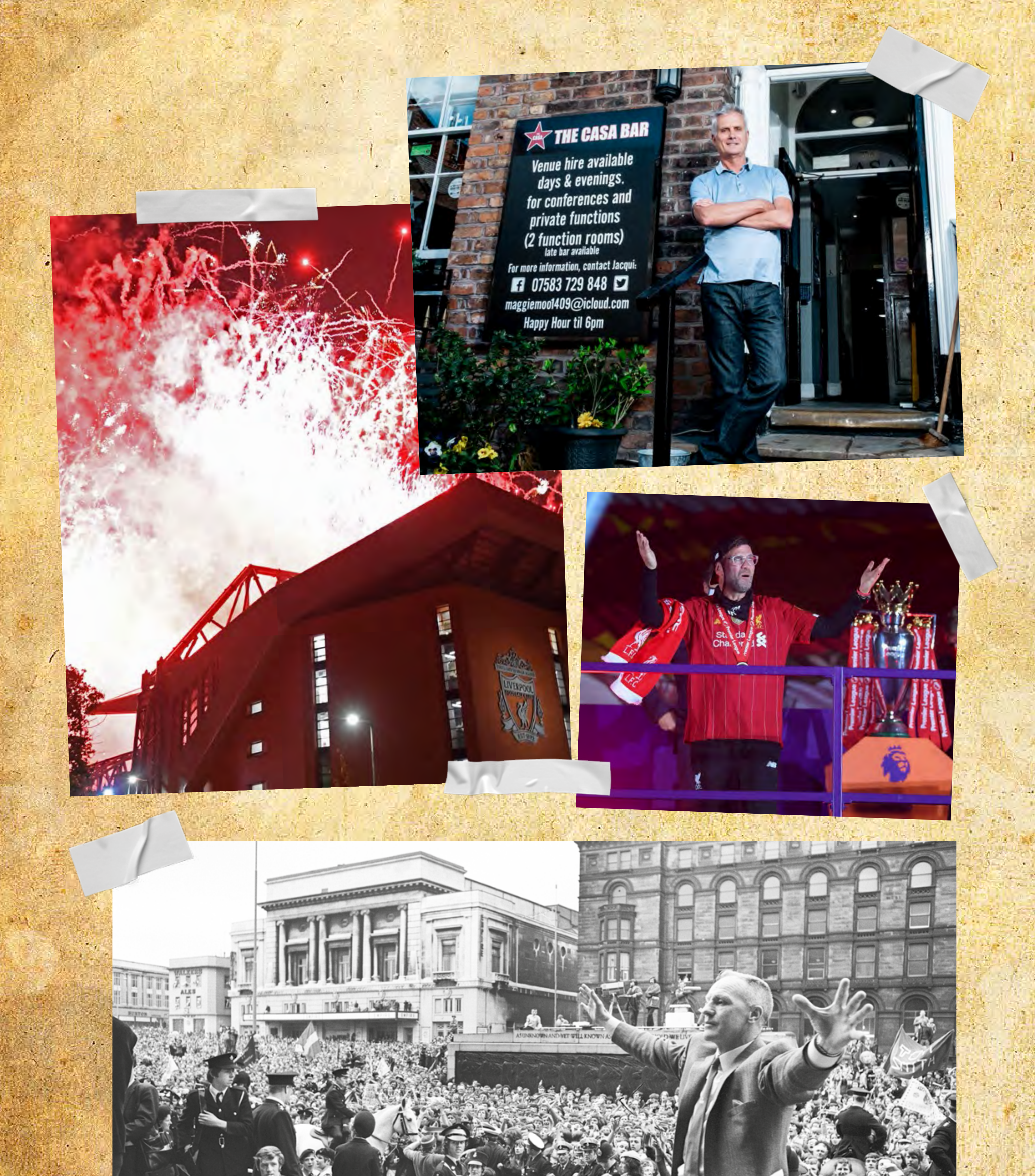
MARCELO PITALUGA HAS BEEN TRAINING REGULARLY WITH YOU AFTER MISSING FOUR MONTHS OF LAST SEASON THROUGH INJURY. HOW HAS HE FITTED INTO THE GOALKEEPING GROUP?
It's been really good to train with him. He's been here nearly a year now so we know him quite well, but he had an injury so it was great to see him back in pre-season. He's been doing really well – pushing on – and I think all the goalkeepers are quite close as a group. We train really well together and it's a good group to be part of.

ALISSON IS LIVERPOOL'S NUMBER ONE SO WHAT'S YOUR PERSONAL AIM FOR THIS SEASON?
I just want to push Alisson as far as I can in training every day and to learn as much as I can as well. When I get opportunities to play I want to do the best I can and just keep performing well.

ARE YOU HOPING TO GET AN OPPORTUNITY TO PLAY IN CARABAO CUP AND FA CUP?
Yeah, hopefully. We've seen in recent seasons that those opportunities have come along and hopefully it's the same again. If and when I do get an opportunity then hopefully I can justify it and do well.

WHAT CAN LIVERPOOL ACHIEVE AS A TEAM THIS SEASON?
We just want to be as competitive as we can. A club like us, a team like us, we want to be challenging for the Premier League, the Champions League and everything we can. We want to go into every game giving it 100 per cent, like we always do, and see where it takes us.




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DIAMONDS IN THE MUD

That's the title of a brilliant new book by author and Reds fan Brian Reade and these are two exclusive LFC-related extracts

Words: Chris McLoughlin

Heroes. We all had them growing up. Most of us have still got them now. But what makes a true hero? The ability to change the world from a position of power? Or the ability to change the world for people when you have none?

Bill Shankly changed all of our worlds. Long before many of us were born. He came from a working-class background to give the people of a working-class city a world-class team. And when Shanks' time at the coal-face was over, Bob Paisley stepped out of his shadow to build an Anfield dynasty.

Liverpool's diamonds are forever. Kopites will always laud the achievements of our greats. It's in our DNA to shout about those who made us happy. But not all heroes receive such praise.

Written by the *Daily Mirror*'s Brian Reade – a lifelong Red who penned *43 Years With The Same Bird* in 2008 – *Diamonds in the Mud* asks why the British have traditionally been taught to venerate kings and queens, generals and Eton-educated prime ministers, while, a few notable exceptions aside, those who changed history from below rarely get a look-in.

It isn't a football book as such, but Liverpool and Liverpool Football Club feature heavily from Shankly and Paisley to Hillsborough mums such as Margaret Aspinall, the heroes running Fans Supporting Foodbanks and the Liverpool 'doCKers'. If you know, you know.

In his own unique style Reade tells the stories of a selection of working-class heroes that he has met through life, supporting Liverpool and journalism. Men and women who rose from humble backgrounds to change the world.

Some in a huge way, others in a smaller way, but all made the people they came from immensely proud whether they were Muhammad Ali or Doreen Lawrence, NHS nurses or the managers of Liverpool FC.

Published by Mirror Books, *Diamonds in the Mud* tells stories that need to be told about the true heroes future generations should be taught about.

The Casa – a community serving bar on Liverpool's Hope Street that was founded by the sacked Liverpool dockers – hosted the launch of *Diamonds In The Mud*.

Bill Shankly's granddaughter Karen Gill and Hillsborough campaigners were among the guests of honour and sat alongside writer Jimmy McGovern, mayor of Liverpool Steve Rotheram, trade unionist Len McCluskey, scriptwriters from some of TV's biggest shows, playwright Nick Allt, poet Jegsy Dodd and die-hard Reds from the Anfield Wrap and LFCTV.

Reade, who is donating all his proceeds from the book to The Casa, held a half-hour Q&A with The Farm's Peter Hooton (who grilled him like a Scouse Jeremy Paxman) and has kindly allowed us to feature a couple of extracts in the magazine alongside the opportunity to win copies of his book.

And in case you're wondering, it wasn't named after the Gerry Cinnamon song. But it is a belter...

'KLOPP HAD ISSUED A CARPE DIEM CALL TO HIS PLAYERS — SEIZE THE DAY'

Everything about the occasion seemed surreal. The sun was still out on a muggy July evening, the pubs around the ground that should have been so rammed half their customers were carousing on pavements had their doors locked and the stadium was silent except for the eerie echoes of warm-up instructions being barked at the players.

That night the sign above the entrance to the pitch should have read *This Isn't Anfield*.

The fastest-ever winners of the English league title, in terms of games, had endured the longest-ever wait to pick up their trophy. And when they did, their home was virtually deserted.

But this was 2020. When COVID struck and football stopped at a point when Jürgen Klopp's relentless team was almost able to reach out and put polish on the silverware that had most eluded them.

They were 25 points clear with nine games to go when their fans plunged into purgatory as calls were made to scrap the season and void all results, just as England had done in 1939 when war was declared on Hitler.

And this after the most painful of waits for an English league title that felt like it had stretched as far back as that war. Thirty years in which a regular habit had become a serial curse. When there had been so many near-misses, so many anti-climaxes, so many rival fans telling Kopites their sense of entitlement was embarrassing. Because no big club goes three decades without a league title, especially when minnows like Blackburn Rovers and Leicester City have etched their name on the trophy.

But in some ways July 22, 2020, was the most familiar of nights. Anfield Road was lined with crowds festooned in red-and-white, flags were out, anthems were roared and there were even cheers when news spread that the enemy, Manchester United, were losing at home to West Ham.

And then the bus came into sight bearing a Liverpool squad who had just obliterated all domestic opposition to regain a status that used to be bestowed on them with unprecedented regularity.

The 21st century version of rattles – plumes of red smoke rising from flares – lit up the L4 sky as the bus cut through a crimson summer mist to enter the bowels of the old citadel, Anfield.

Inside, it was business as usual for a Liverpool title coronation. Five goals were put past a London side (Chelsea) in a crushing exhibition of superiority, just as in 1964 when Arsenal were thrashed to end the previous longest title drought of 17 years.

And the celebrations may have belonged to a more modern, pyrotechnically-choreographed age, but there was no doubting the sense of ecstasy that connected the players and manager to supporters who gathered outside the ground or huddled around TV screens in every corner of the world.

The eloquent Jürgen Klopp had issued a *carpe diem* call to his players. A decree to seize the day, embrace the fruits of their hard work, and imagine that the stadium was packed to the rafters.

He and the squad took to a makeshift stage on the Kop looking like a shower of matchday tourists who had wandered in from the museum: scarfs around wrists, reverse baseball hats and flashing phones, their faces beaming as they looked down at the green brilliance of the Anfield pitch under floodlights.



The man chosen to hand over the medals and the trophy was Kenny Dalglish. Chosen because he was the club's most celebrated player and the manager who was last in charge when Liverpool were crowned English champions in 1990. An umbilical link to a glorious past.

Outside Anfield, as the delirious crowds thickened against police advice, fireworks soared and the vast repertoire of songs was plundered.

One in particular: "We've conquered all of Europe, we're never gonna stop. From Paris down to Turkey, we've won the f****n' lot. Bob Paisley and Bill Shankly, the fields of Anfield Road, we are loyal supporters and we come from Liverpool … allez, allez, allez."

Those wise old sages, Paisley and Shankly, who built, then expanded, Liverpool until it became a dynasty that conquered the bloody world were looking on in bronze.

As fans clambered on to the statues of the two simple, working-class men who made it all possible, you couldn't help but think how chuffed they would have been had they lived to see this day…

'WE BELIEVED SHANKLY BECAUSE HE HAD DRAWN US UNDER HIS SPELL'

It was the first time I had felt the power of oratory raise my neck hairs. Less than 24 hours earlier I had been inconsolable, left devastated by the sight of Arsenal's Charlie George lying on the Wembley turf with arms outstretched while, behind him,I'd seen the Reds lose an FA Cup final for the first time in my life and it hurt badly.

On the Sunday I awoke feeling empty and in need of reassurance that this new Liverpool team we were witnessing would come back stronger next year.

That the five-year trophy drought would soon be over and I'd watch the birth of Bill Shankly's second great team. I sought strength in a solo pilgrimage to welcome home the beaten team in Liverpool city centre not knowing what to expect.

When I arrived early into Lime Street, unable to get within 50 yards of St George's Hall, it was clear that almost a quarter-of-a million people had sought similar solace.

Up there on the steps of the vast neo-classical building the defeated team stood stony-faced in their Wembley suits. Then Shankly took the mic, spread his arms out and standing under those huge columns like Caesar on a triumphant return to Rome, told us, "Chairman Mao could never have seen such a show of red strength."

The appreciative yells made the cement below me shake. And then a reverential silence descended as the great man addressed us…

"Yesterday we lost the Cup. But you, the people, have won everything. Since I came here to Liverpool, to Anfield, I've drummed it into my players, time and again, that they are privileged to be playing for you. If they didn't believe it, they will now."

His speech was punctuated with wild applause and chants of "Shankly, Shankly" which only ceased with the raising of his hand. He promised us that this team was going places. He vowed that he would take them back to Wembley and win it for us. And we believed him because he had drawn us under his spell. His mesmeric performance had left us putty in his hands.

Q&A with Peter Hooton

Working class hero

Book launch at The Casa

I walked away from St George's Hall feeling as though I'd just had an audience with a messiah who was part Robin Hood, Martin Luther King and Jesus Christ. It certainly felt like a religious event, one where the preacher helped us to exorcise the demons of defeat by convincing us we would soon be feasting on the milk and honey of the Promised Land.

Shankly cultivated this divine connection, claiming that supporting Liverpool "is more than fanaticism, it's a religion. To the many thousands who come here to worship, Anfield isn't a football ground, it's a sort of shrine."

Three years later, when the Scot kept his word by leading Liverpool back to the FA Cup final in which they thrashed Newcastle 3-0, photographers caught an image any religious leader would have been pleased with. Two grown men, on their knees, bowing down and kissing his shoes.

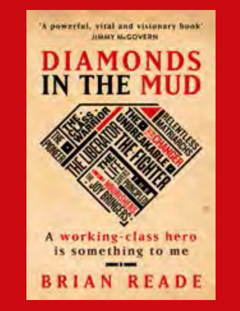
It is easy for a football manager, any leader really, to tell their followers how much they mean to them, but with Shankly it never appeared remotely fake. Not least because he backed his words up with actions.

He brought the fans with him on the journey to the top, making them central to his vision. His greatest fear was that anyone might think he'd cheated them. He loathed selling others short.

It's why virtually every person who ever wrote to him had a personal reply, hammered out on his old typewriter, in the parlour of his small semi-detached house in West Derby. Why every kid who knocked on his door was given what they wanted: A chat, a joke, an autograph or a "yes" to a request to have a kick-about on the nearby playing fields that now bear his name.

Few other managers or players were doing that at the time and hardly any today would recognise that level of devotion, let alone engage in it.

WIN THE BOOK



Diamonds in the Mud by Brian Reade is on sale now.
Order from mirrorbooks.co.uk and use offer code XA9 to get £5 off the RRP of £20.
To be in with a chance of winning one of three copies simply answer the following question:

Who scored for Liverpool in the 1971 and 1974 FA Cup finals?

Email your answer, name, address and contact phone number with 'DIAMONDS IN THE MUD COMPETITION' in the subject line to liverpoolfcmag@reachsport.com.
Closing date is Monday 4 October. Normal competition rules apply.
Winners will receive prizes ASAP after 4/10/21.

Clive Tyldesley book winners: Jason Hind, Southport; Olivia Vincent, High Wycombe; Russell Broomhall, Burntwood; Juliette Witek, Solihull; Kevin MacDonald, Tonbridge.


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LOAN STARS

Focusing on the Academy lads striking out elsewhere this season and those who have remained to help the Reds make solid starts to their respective league campaigns

Eleven players from the Reds' Academy set-up are hoping to make an impact elsewhere in the British Isles while out on loan during the 2021/22 campaign.

Four of that number will be aiming to make their mark at English teams, while three have moved to Welsh clubs, another trio to Scottish sides and another is plying his trade in Ireland.

A quartet of young Liverpool players are competing in the Championship this season. The first to make the move was teenage centre-back Sepp van den Berg (left) who returned to Preston North End where he had spent the second half of last season.

The Dutchman has made a bright start, scoring twice last month. He was on target in the Lilywhites' Carabao Cup second-round win at Morecambe before netting in the 3-1 league victory over Swansea City at Deepdale four days later.

Also playing in Lancashire this term is midfielder Leighton Clarkson who has joined his hometown club of Blackburn Rovers.

Clarkson, who has made three first-team appearances for the Reds to date, is now looking to emulate the success his team-mate Harvey Elliott enjoyed at Ewood Park last season. The 19-year-old made his debut in a 2-1 home defeat by West Bromwich Albion last month.

Meanwhile two other Liverpool lads joined him in English football's second tier on transfer-deadline day.

>>



Leighton Clarkson at Blackburn

Rhys Williams made a strong impression during 19 appearances for the senior side last term and has now joined former Reds Academy coach Steve Cooper at Swansea City – but not before putting pen to paper on a new long-term contract with Liverpool.

Winger Sheyi Ojo, who spent last season in Wales himself with Cardiff City, has joined Millwall and will link up with the Lions under the management of ex-Everton defender Gary Rowett.

Both Williams and Ojo played for the Reds' Under-23s in their Premier League 2 derby win over Everton at Southport last month with Ojo on target in Liverpool's 3-1 success. This month they could come face-to-face again but on opposing sides with Swansea set to host Millwall at the Liberty Stadium on Wednesday 15 September.

Joining Rhys in South Wales this season is midfielder Jake Cain who has made a temporary switch to League Two side Newport County. He made his debut for the Exiles in a 2-0 defeat of Plymouth Argyle in the Papa John's Trophy.



Jake Cain and Rhys Williams

Jake, who turned 20 in early September, made his first-team debut in the FA Cup fourth-round replay win over Shrewsbury Town at Anfield in February 2020 and had trained regularly with Jürgen Klopp's squad since. Now he will be looking to earn valuable experience under Michael Flynn at Rodney Parade.

A little closer to home, striker Paul Glatzel is also playing in League Two with Tranmere Rovers.

The 20-year-old signed his first professional contract with the Reds during the 2018/19 season, which ended with him captaining the Under-18s to FA Youth Cup success. Team-mates at Prenton Park include ex-Reds midfielder Jay Spearing and Academy defender Joe Maguire.

Elsewhere three Reds are bidding to prove their value north of the border this term. Midfielder Ben Woodburn has completed a season-long loan move to Scottish Premiership pacesetters Hearts. The 21-year-old, who appeared in the Anfield pre-season friendlies against Athletic Club and CA Osasuna, has linked up with Robbie Neilson's side.

The Jam Tarts collected ten points from 12 ahead of the international break with Woodburn making a winning start as he made his debut for the Edinburgh club in a 2-0 win over Dundee United at Tannadice.



Paul Glatzel at Tranmere

>>



Ben Woodburn at Hearts

Also competing in that division this season is left-back Adam Lewis with the 21-year-old playing at Livingston following spells at Amiens and Plymouth last season.

One league below, midfielder Luis Longstaff has made the switch to Queen's Park, who topped Scottish Division One after a handful of games.

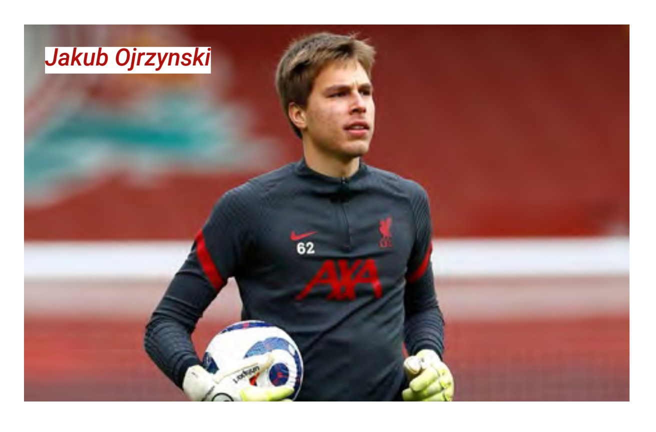
Longstaff committed his future to the Reds by signing a new contract last June and the 20-year-old will now look to build up further senior experience during his spell with the Glasgow club where a certain Andy Robertson started his senior career.

Completing the LFC team of Academy loan-rangers are goalkeepers Vitezslav Jaros and Jakub Ojrzynski.

Jaros has been playing for St Patrick's Athletic, having moved ahead of the Irish Premier Division season starting back in March. Last month the 20-year-old Czech was a penalty shoot-out hero, helping them reach the quarter-finals of the FAI Cup as they saw off Cork City 4-1 from the spot following a 1-1 draw.

Ojrzynski meanwhile is with Welsh Premier League side Caernarfon Town for the 2021/22 campaign.


Adam Lewis at Livingston



Jakub Ojrzynski

The Pole signed a new long-term contract with the Reds this summer having joined the club from Legia Warsaw two years ago. A vocal presence at the back, he's also trained with the first team and took his place on the bench for the Premier League clash with Sheffield United in February.

While those players look to catch the eye while away from Kirkby, the Reds' remaining Under-23s and Under-18s made an unbeaten start to their league campaigns during August.

Marc Bridge-Wilkinson's U18s scored five times in each of their first two league games, following a 5-3 home triumph over Stoke City with an impressive 5-0 win against Manchester United at Carrington.

"That was a great team performance and I was really happy with the boys," said Bridge-Wilkinson. "We scored some great goals and there were some really good individual displays as well."

His charges continue their league campaign next month and many are also set to taste UEFA Youth League football for the first time when an U19s side take on AC Milan in their opening fixture on 15 September.

In the older age-group, Barry Lewtas's U23s have drawn two and won one of their opening three Premier League 2 games of the season – home draws with Manchester City and Brighton bookending a fine win at Everton in the mini-derby at Southport.

Goals from Ojo, winger Kaide Gordon and forward Max Woltman helped the young Reds earn the points at The Pure Stadium.


Kaide Gordon in action

GOOD MONTH FOR...

Oakley Cannonier's name first became familiar to Liverpool fans back in 2019. His quick thinking and football awareness was already apparent when, as a ball boy, he fed Trent Alexander-Arnold to take the quick corner from which Divock Origi completed the Champions League semi-final comeback against Barcelona at Anfield.

Now Cannonier has been showing off his anticipation in front of goal with five in the Under-18s' opening two league games of the campaign. Having missed much of last season through injury, he scored twice in the opening-day 5-3 defeat of Stoke City and then helped himself to a hat-trick as the Reds won 5-0 at Manchester United.



Cannonier had also scored a treble in a pre-season victory over Chester and, for added good measure, ended August with another two goals in a 5-0 defeat of Watford in a friendly.

The England youth international signed his first professional contract with the Reds in July.

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THE SCOUSER

Interview: William Hughes



IN OUR TEAM



Fresh from being named the best player of last season by Reds fans, **Missy Bo Kearns** can't wait to work with the manager whose teams inspired her

The return of Matt Beard as manager of Liverpool FC Women has been something of a surreal experience for Missy Bo Kearns.

The 20-year-old Scouse midfielder was still at primary school when Beard first took charge of the Reds before he went on to lead a talented team to back-to-back Women's Super League titles in 2013 and 2014.

Bo, then a member of the club's Centre of Excellence, remembers being slightly in awe of the boss. "I was in the Under-11s when he was first here. I used to go to the Halton Stadium in Widnes and would be in the stands with my team, cheering them on. I remember that we were also ball girls a few times too!

"I didn't really meet Matt to talk to, but I remember that he came to our team's presentation evening and things like that.

"He was the big thing then and so to now be working under him is great and I'm really looking forward to it."

EVERY GAME IN THE CHAMPIONSHIP IS TOUGH BECAUSE EVERYONE RAISES THEIR GAME AGAINST LIVERPOOL – BUT WE'RE READY

While Beard was a big influence on the young Bo, so was one of the key members of his successful side, Fara Williams, England's most-capped international.

"I think she's the best midfielder I've seen in the women's game," Bo explains. "Even to her final playing days she was unbelievable and she was the player I liked to watch in that Liverpool team. Obviously she played in the position that I like to and she was just so skilful and a joy to watch."

One of Beard's first decisions since returning to the Reds was to hand Kearns a new deal. She admits that was a big boost.

"When the new manager comes in and you're out of contract, it can be a nervy moment. They might come in and say they don't want you. But I spoke to Matt on the phone and once he told me about his philosophy and so on, I was really raring to work under him.

"Since he's come in, he's helped me already and coached me on things I didn't know were an issue. But he's been realising the weaknesses and we are ready to work hard to strengthen those things. So that's what I've been working on a lot over pre-season and I can't wait to see the outcome."

She has also been handed a new shirt number too, swapping the no21 for the historic Liverpool no7 jersey.

"Basically, when Matt came in he rang me and said, 'Do you want the number seven shirt?' At first, I said, 'Isn't that a winger's number?' but he answered back by saying, 'Kenny Dalglish wasn't a winger, Luis Suarez wasn't a winger...'

"So I said, 'Alright then, I'll have it!' So that's how it's happened. Then when I thought about it at Liverpool, seven is a vital number and it's got loads of history so I'm ready to take it on and see what I can do with it."

Last season saw Bo make the breakthrough as a first-team regular with the Reds, scoring twice in 19 appearances and going on to be named Player of the Season by the Liverpool Women Supporters' Club.

Her skillset also saw her nicknamed 'Bo Salah' by interim boss Amber Whiteley, now the team's assistant-manager, something her team-mates quickly latched onto!

"I think winning Player of the Season was a proud moment for me and it showed that all my hard work had paid off, but now I'm hungry to kick on even more," she continues. "This season is about the team getting promoted and I want to be a part of that and contribute as much as I can.

"Every game in the Championship is a tough one because everyone raises their game to play against Liverpool. We got a taste for it last year, so we know what it's like. But I think this year, it's going to be even harder and we saw that in the opening game [a 0-1 defeat by London City Lionesses].

"Every team has strengthened and the women's game is getting bigger every year, so it's going to be a tough test for us but I'm looking forward to it. If we can play in this league and win it, then will be ready to compete in the top league and I think that's where Liverpool belong."

Beard has made eight signings to help freshen things up with most of the newcomers having been used to playing in the top-flight. Kearns, who played in the same Mossley Hill boys' team as men's midfielder Curtis Jones, believes the experience of the rest of the squad last season will help the newcomers too.





"I think it will help in the sense that last year we were all new to it, most of us, and we probably had a bit of a sense that we shouldn't be playing in the Championship after being relegated on points-per-game because of the pandemic.

"But now we know what it's all about and understand how hard it is. There are some girls coming from the top league this year so we'll be able to tell them, 'Don't underestimate the opponents'. They'll all put a shift in and it's not as easy as people might think. The Championship is really tough."

Among the Reds' signings is creative midfielder Carla Humphrey but Bo says she welcomes the competition for places and believes it can help take her game to a new level.

"I think for me, I've always been told that at Liverpool there's always going to be someone wanting to take your shirt so you've got to be on it 100 per cent of the time, give it your all and stick to the Liverpool philosophies.

"Whoever is playing the best or training the best will play, and that's what Matt has said. Sometimes he might change it around because of the state of the game or which players he thinks will suit a certain situation better, but of course you want to be playing every week and it's up to me to show him that I should be."

Although the Reds started their new FA Women's Championship campaign with that setback against London City Lionesses, she says the team have been eager to get their league campaign underway.

"We were raring to go. Pre-season had been nine or ten weeks and we'd had a few scenarios where the manager wasn't in because of COVID and a few of the players were isolating at various times too, so it was a bit up-and-down. But I'm sure that was the case for most of the other teams too.

"Hopefully now we're into the season we can have a solid base and we can work on our consistency."

Liverpool's second game of the season saw them experience playing in a Premier League stadium with a 3-2 win over Watford played at Vicarage Road. Bo, who got the opener after six minutes, admits that was good to sample but says it's points not pitches that matter.

" I think it's all a great experience and great that women's games are being played in Premier League stadiums. A pitch is a pitch, though, and for us the most important thing is getting the three points now.

"We can't be fazed by the stadiums we're playing in. I think that's a vital thing that we've all got to stick to this season because we've got to get three points in pretty much every game to get promoted."

Another positive has, of course been the return of supporters. That is something Bo can appreciate first-hand. She was at Anfield for the pre-season friendlies against Athletic Bilbao and CA Osasuna and says it was great to be back at Anfield.

"It's been brilliant to go back to Anfield with family," she says. "Any men's game I can go to, I'm going, home or away!" she says.

"We've missed the fans. The games were quiet without them and it was like you were playing a pre-season friendly when they weren't there. So it's been be nice to have the fans back and to see people coming out to enjoy the games.

"I think it's a big part of football and, especially in Liverpool, the fans are a vital part of it. I'd been really looking forward to seeing them back at our games and hopefully we can give them plenty to cheer this season."



MADE-UP FOR ASH

Bo's team-mate Ashley Hodson is set to become a record-breaker this month. When the 26-year-old attacker, who hails from St Helens, played at Watford in the Reds' second game of the season, she equalled the club's appearance record in the professional era of 115 set by former title-winning skipper Gemma Bonner.

The long-serving Hodson made her senior debut for the Reds in 2014 and was in line to set a new high when the Reds hosted Bristol City on 12 September.

Kearns says of her: "Ash is my very good mate and I've known her since I was a kid. She was a few years older than me and I've always had a laugh with her. If anyone deserves it, it's Ash as she's worked so hard.

"She's had two major knee injuries and also had a hamstring injury last season and she's still here, breaking this record. She's been very loyal to Liverpool. It's a big achievement and I'm made-up for her. She's had her ups and downs but she's still cracking on. You can't fault Ash."




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JOURNEY HUNTERS

Words: Chris McLouhglin

It wasn't quite Christmas Eve. The whole family weren't sat around the house in matching pyjamas. There wasn't a plate of mince pies and carrots left out for overnight visitors. And the red noses would be getting on coaches down to East Anglia rather than belong to reindeer pulling a sleigh. But it was always a special night nevertheless.

New season eve, that is. The night before the Mighty Reds of Liverpool began their new campaign.

A night when the slate is clean, anticipation is high and you dare to dream of what might lie ahead over the next nine months. This year, on 13 August to be precise, it was even more special. Not just because after such a long wait the travelling Kop could finally get back on the road. But because of the breaking news that day.

'Virgil van Dijk has signed a new contract...' Get in there. Not just any old contract, a new long-term contract. Until 2025. He isn't just back. The big man is here to stay.

"Absolutely great, great news," said Jürgen Klopp. "Imagine if we would have had to buy this boy now? Thank God we only had to give him a new contract!"

You got to love Jürgen, haven't you? He sounded as excited as any of us to get VVD signed up on a new deal. Imagine how much you'd want to play for him knowing he's buzzing to have you there.

It was massively good news and with Alisson, Trent Alexander-Arnold and Fabinho already having put pen to paper, that's some shrewd behind-the-scenes work before the new season.

"I think Liverpool is arguably the biggest club in the world with the best fans, I think, in the world, so I enjoy playing for the club," said the big man. "I enjoy playing for a family club that really is there for you no matter what.

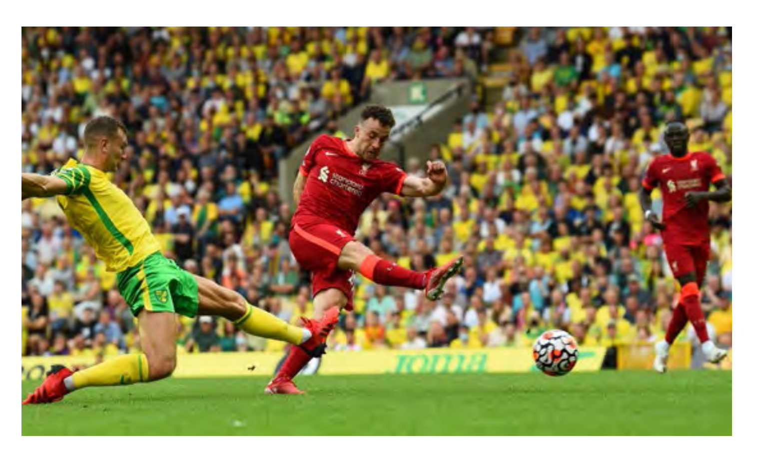
"The nice feeling I get at the club is that we are all doing it together, we are all in the same boat, we all want to have success together."

With Big Virg back in the team our chances of success are definitely better. Without him the Reds were a bit like *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here* without the jungle last season – still half-decent but just not as good. And just to prove it, look what happened at Carrow Road.

Norwich City 0 Liverpool 3. Virgil and Joel Matip return – after only playing 11 minutes alongside each other during the whole of last season – and the Reds immediately keep a clean-sheet. No need to get the rocket scientists in to suss that one out.

Linda Pizzuti Henry loves a clean-sheet. She was straight onto Twitter giving it props and also described our three strike as "beautiful goals." Spot on Linda, the boys were clinical.











Norwich had yo-yoed back up this summer and Carrow Road was quite a sight as the teams came out with yellow-and-green flags everywhere. Well apart from among the 2,669 Reds in the away end – and a few looking out of the windows of the Holiday Inn in the corner behind it. Must be mad waking up in a hotel room and seeing a Premier League pitch outside your window. Alan Partridge certainly didn't get that at the Linton Travel Tavern.

Anyhow, Andy Robertson's pre-season injury against Athletic Club meant there was a first league start for Kostas Tsimikas. He came from Greece and had a thirst for Norwich, almost setting Diogo Jota up for an early goal. We didn't have to wait long for it to come.

Twenty-six minutes on the clock. Trent to Mo to Dio-goal. One-nil and the Redmen were up and running. The Canaries didn't like Jota running at them and Todd Cantwell scythed him down with one second-half tackle that was straight out of the 1960s. On came Bobby Firmino and it took him four minutes to make it 2-0.

James Milner won possession, Firmino played in Mane. His shot was blocked but from the rebound Salah got his second assist of the day when he teed up Bobby. The away end liked that one. Put it this way, you weren't getting much kip in the Holiday Inn when *Si Señor* was belted out and it was also the Reds' 8,000th league goal.

Nobody has seen them all – unless there's a 130-year-old season-ticket holder hidden away in the Main Stand we know about – and it feels like Mo Salah has got about 3,000 of them.

For the fifth season running he netted an opening-day goal, to set a new Premier League record in the process, and give travelling Kopites three goals to go with our three points. Happy away-days.

"We were not here to show the most exciting football, just to get the basis for the new season, and we did," said Jürgen afterwards. "Football is back." Could've added a 'boom' there, boss.

With no midweek game to play it felt like the days leading up to our first home game against Burnley dragged on forever. Ben Davies and Leighton Clarkson headed off on loan to Sheffield United and Blackburn Rovers and sad news emerged that Terry Smith – a Liverpool FC director from 1992 to 2007 – had passed away at the age of 87.

Terry, who founded Radio City in 1974, had replaced Bob Paisley on the Anfield board and was one of a number of people remembered before kick-off ahead of taking on the Clarets.

A mural on the Kop – designed and set up by Red All Over The Land's Andy Knott – paid tribute to Andrew Devine, the 97th unlawfully killed victim of the Hillsborough disaster. Andrew died in July, aged 55, having never recovered from the serious injuries he suffered on 15 April 1989.

It was somewhat chilling to hear 'Justice for the 97' being sung when our number of lost souls has been 96 for so long. Andrew, and his family, were in all of our thoughts as Jordan Henderson placed a wreath behind the Kop-end goal.









Everyone knows by now that Jürgen Klopp's matchday programme notes are unmissable and he was at his best in the Burnley programme. "What makes this place special is the appreciation of the journey," he wrote. "A friend of mine who is closer to the fan culture than I could ever profess to be, said to me that people support Liverpool not because they are glory hunters but because they are journey hunters. I love this sentiment.

"Our 2021/22 journey is underway and we should enjoy every second of it. Not because we know we will have success or we expect it – but because we chase it together, as a collective. It feels like an adventure again and that is a wonderful sensation after so long apart."

Journey hunters. Nailed it. We'll always be in it to win it as Liverpool supporters, but enjoying the ride to get there is our true way of life. If we don't win, we go again and again until we do.

So with all due respect to Burnley, after 518 days without an Anfield full-house, they had no chance of getting a result. It was always going to be our day.



The contrasting weather had visiting boss Sean Dyche putting his suit jacket on and off like a wedding guest at an evening do and the union of Liverpool players and supporters made Anfield feel like a fortress again. For a 12.30pm kick-off, it was loud.

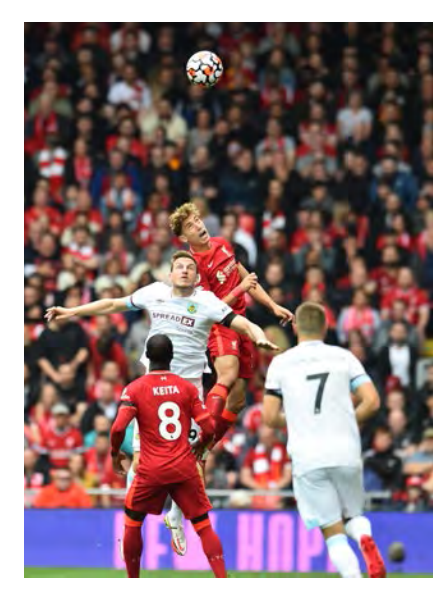
Jota headed home a Tsimikas cross for our first – and his first in front of a capacity crowd – and Mane half-volleyed the second from Alexander-Arnold's clipped pass.

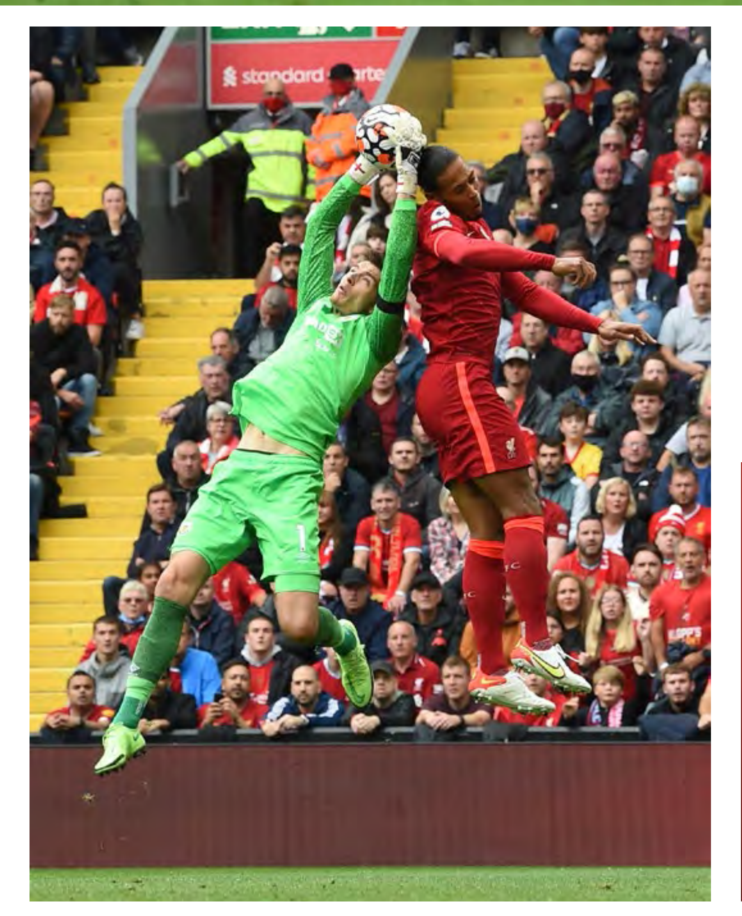
Liverpool 2 Burnley 0 and what a day for Harvey Elliott. Selected to start his first Premier League game at the age of 18, he buzzed around the pitch like it had always been his patch. Elliott was involved in the second goal, linking the play between van Dijk and Alexander-Arnold, and would have had his first Premier League assist had Salah not been ruled offside after curling home from his wonderful pass.

Had to love Harvey's confidence in his first LFC matchday programme interview too. "It's either go big or go home," he said. "The Prem. That's our aim. If you come second, third or fourth then you don't get a medal. You either win or you come away with nothing. So that's our ambition, that's our aim. Premier League. Champions League. And we don't settle for second place."



There speaks a boyhood Red who thinks like the rest of us, but the following morning came devastating news in the *Sunday Mirror* about another lifelong Liverpudlian.





Terry McDermott has been diagnosed with the early stages of Lewy Body dementia. The show of support Terry Mac received on social media was heart-warming, but what a truly awful thing to happen to another one of our greats. We're all with you, Terry.

Back at the AXA Training Centre and while Andy Robertson was extending his contract ("I want to stay at this club for as long as possible") Xherdan Shaqiri was heading off to pastures new after completing a move to Lyon.

With bigger calves than you can see on Countryfile, four winner's medals, goals against Manchester United and Everton plus his assists against Newcastle and Barcelona, Shaq is definitely a Liverpool cult-hero.







Ben Woodburn, who was on the bench at Norwich, won't be involved in our Carabao Cup third-round game at Carrow Road after going up the road to Edinburgh to spend a season with Hearts. But when it comes to cup draws, few are bigger – or take longer to complete – than the Champions League group-stage draw.

All eyes were on UEFA's plastic pots in Nyon and draw-makers Branislav Ivanovic and Michael Essien – who had all kinds of issues opening the balls and getting his group letters the right way up – gave us a corker. Atletico Madrid, Porto, AC Milan. If that sounds tough to you, imagine being a Porto fan given our recent record against them.

"I laughed, to be honest, pretty loud because it is a tough group obviously," Jürgen told liverpoolfc.com.

"It's Champions League, so that's how it is, and you have to play the best teams in Europe, and obviously some of them are in our group! So, I think our supporters should be looking forward to it – we do, for sure."



Reunions with Luis Suarez and Marko Grujic aside, Liverpool and AC Milan have never met at Anfield or the San Siro, only in Istanbul and Athens. Which is mad considering we've got 13 European Cups between us.

Chelsea were a game away from facing AC Milan in both the 2005 and 2007 Champions League finals only to be knocked out twice at Anfield. They've since won it twice and arrived at Anfield for our second home game of the season as champions of Europe. Fair play, but the 'We See Things They'll Never See' banner in the away end doesn't work as well when you're four European Cups behind your opponents.

Amid another sizzling Saturday atmosphere, with Elliott keeping his place in midfield and Robbo back at left-back, one of the most intense first-halves of football you could imagine broke out.

Elliott sent a daisy-cutter wide, Henderson miscued a volley. Kai Havertz headed the visitors in front, Mason Mount dragged a shot across goal. £97.5m signing Romelu Lukaku was marshalled better by Matip and Van Dijk than a Ferrari at the Monaco Grand Prix. Firmino went off injured.

It all got a bit tasty on the stroke of half-time. Matip headed against the bar and Mane reacted quickest to poke the rebound goalwards, but Reece James blocked it with his arm on the goal-line.

Referee Anthony Taylor said no pen, VAR had a word in his ear and seconds after he looked at the TV screen in the Anfield tunnel James was seeing red and Salah was ready to take a spot-kick. But only after Antonio Rudiger roughed up the penalty-spot, Edouard Mendy got in his face and Cesar Azpilicueta tried to knock the ball from his grasp.

It's almost like they hadn't took the decision well, but Salah certainly took his spot-kick well to make it 1-1. A second half against ten men was an opportunity to claim three huge points, but Thomas Tuchel's men are tipped to win the Premier League for a reason – they know how to get results.

Jota headed over and Mendy kept out Robertson, van Dijk and Fabinho to earn the visitors a point as they dug in with a 5-3-1 formation. Frustrating, but Jürgen spoke sense afterwards.

"It's rare to get this kind of enjoyment, the intensity both













teams put in is really incredible," he said. "That's then, together with the atmosphere our people can create, a top game today and really enjoyable with a little thing that we don't like too much – that it is only a point. But it's fine, seven points, that's the start."

Having lost at home to Burnley and Chelsea in the corresponding fixtures last season – although if you weren't there to see it, did it really happen? – it is also four points more than we got from those games last time around.

Positive vibes, so bring on, er, another international break. Just what you need as you're trying to build some momentum.

The closing of the transfer window without any further Anfield arrivals turned some Red tweeters into angry birds, but good things come to those who wait. Liverpool did get more internal business done with Henderson, Nat Phillips and Rhys Williams – ahead of a Swansea loan-move – all signing new deals. Jake Cain (Newport County), Sheyi Ojo (Millwall) and Luis Longstaff (Queen's Park) departed on loan, Carol from the canteen signed a new long-term deal. Or was that just a meme?

"I still feel young, I still feel fresh, I feel as though I'm in probably my prime at this moment in time in terms of how I feel physically and experience mixed in," she sai....only joking. This was your captain Jordan Henderson speaking and he had more to say.

"So I still feel as though I've got a lot to give and a lot more to come. I know people may look at it and go, 'Maybe this takes him to he's 34, 35'. But I want to be playing football for as long as I can, so who knows what age I'll go to.

"To continue this journey is incredible for me and my family, and I hope the fans and the club feel the same way."

Our Champions League and Premier League-winning skipper continuing his journey to lift more silverware for the journey-hunters. Of course we do, Jordan.

Now let's get stuck into September...

WHAT'S ON

SEPT/OCT



MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

It's another busy spell for the Reds when fixtures resume on 12 September with seven games scheduled between then and the next international break in early October.

Sunday-afternoon Premier League games top and tail the footballing feast, starting with a visit to Marcelo Bielsa's Leeds United and ending with an equally mouthwatering Anfield clash against Pep Guardiola's Manchester City on 3 October.

In-between times, the Reds host Crystal Palace on 18 September and make a first ever trip to the Brentford Community Stadium seven days later.

The UEFA Champions League returns with another first – a visit of AC Milan to Anfield. That takes place on Wednesday 15 September with a tasty trip to FC Porto to follow on matchday two, pencilled in for Tuesday 28 September.

Liverpool's involvement in the Carabao Cup also begins with a long trip to Norwich City for a third round date at Carrow Road on 21 September.

Forza Liverpool!



SEPT/OCT

WHAT'S ON



SHOW YOUR SUPPORT!

Liverpool FC Women's campaign continues with a couple of home games during September, so why not get along to Prenton Park to get behind Matt Beard's team?

There will be plenty of reunions happening on 12 September when the Reds host Bristol City (2pm). Ex-Robins Jasmine Matthews, Carla Humphrey and Yana Daniels could be in the Liverpool line-up against their former club while former Reds Satara Murray and Simran Jhamat are likely to be in the visitors' travelling party.

A fortnight later, on 26 September, the Reds return to Tranmere to take on Crystal Palace FC Women (also kicking off at 2pm).

ALL THOSE YEARS AGO...

ANNIVERSARIES

57 years since the Reds defeated KR Rejkyavik in their first European tie at Anfield on 14 September 1964

32 years ago since the Reds beat Crystal Palace 9-0 on 12 September 1989

29 years since Ian Rush broke Roger Hunt's Liverpool FC goalscoring record in Europe on 16 September 1992

47 years since the club's record victory – 11-0 v Stromsgodset on 17 September 1974

53 years since Alun Evans made a scoring debut for Liverpool FC on 21 September 1968

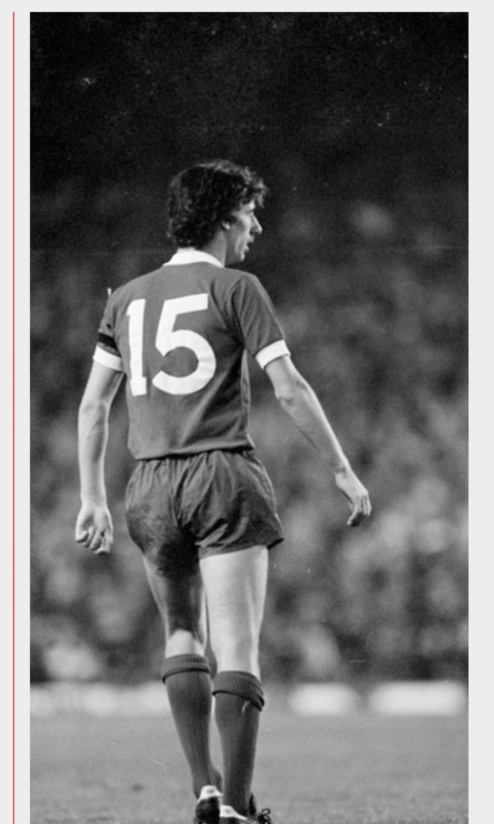
12 years since Fernando Torres scored his fourth LFC hat-trick in a 6-1 win over Hull City on 26 September 2009.

And it's 40 years since Ian Rush scored his first goal for LFC on 30 September 1981...

Rushie's first goal for Liverpool, in September 1981, was something of a bittersweet affair. Still a teenager at the time, the Welshman opened his account in a 7-0 win over Finnish opponents Oulu Palloseura in the second leg of a European Cup first-round tie.

Wearing the no15 shirt, he came on as a 64th-minute substitute for David Johnson and scored the fifth goal of the evening. Yet the Anfield atmosphere was subdued, coming a day after the announcement of Bill Shankly's death. The Kop sang 'Shankly, Shankly, Shankly' to the tune of *Amazing Grace* for the entire second half.

The great Scot would have been delighted to know Rushie's goal was the first of 30 he'd score that season



(and one of two in Europe) and of an astonishing total of 346 he would net for the Reds during an incredible career with the club.

In his 2008 autobiography *Rush*, he recalled that opening goal being tempered by a belief he would not graduate from the Reds' second string. How wrong he was!

"Meeting a low cross from Kenny Dalglish, I kept my head down to fire the ball past the Oulu goalkeeper, who didn't think it prudent to move.

"My goal was a simple tap-in and I should've been overjoyed, but at the time I was still entrenched in the reserves, and any joy I felt was tempered by my belief that, irrespective of how many goals I scored for the reserves, that was where I was going to stay."



MEET THE NEW RECRUITS . . .

RICHARD MONEY: Born in Lowestoft, began playing career with Ipswich Town on associated-schoolboy forms, and moved to Scunthorpe. Skipper at Scunthorpe by the time he was 21, transferred to Fulham for around £45,000. Has played more than 300 League games, can operate at full-back, in centre of defence or in midfield.

IAN RUSH: Hails from Flint, spotted by Chester while playing in schoolboy football, and on leaving school became an apprentice, then full-time professional at 18. Broke through to first team last season, became a regular marksman and finished up by making his debut for Wales at senior level and moving to Liverpool as the season ended.

BIRTHDAYS

Steve Ogrizovic 64 on 12 September

David Thompson 44 on 12 September

Karlheinz Riedle 56 on 16 September

John Aldridge 63 on 18 September

Kevin Lewis 81 on 19 September

Harry Kewell 43 on 22 September

John Arne Riise 41 on 24 September

Ronnie Whelan 60 on 25 September

Jack Bearne 20 on 15 September

Alisson Becker 29 on 2 October

Roberto Firmino 30 on 2 October

Trent Alexander-Arnold 23 on 7 October



WHAT'S IN



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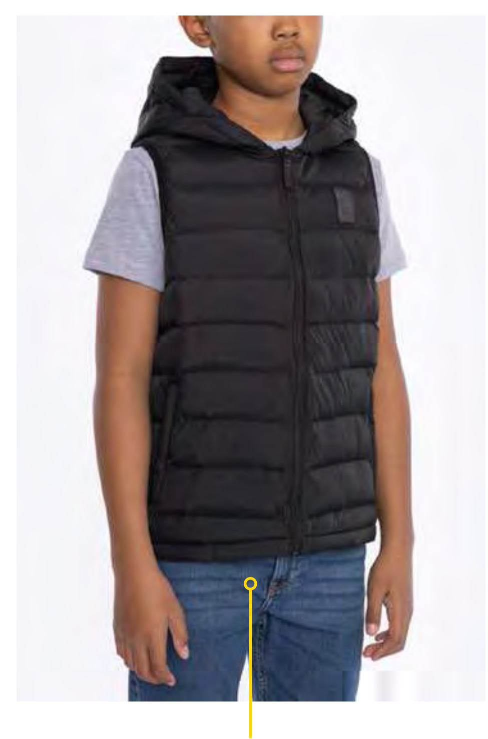
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MENS RED LIVERBIRD EMBLEM TEE
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FIXTURES 2021/22

		SCORE	TV	SCORERS
AUGUST				
Sat 14	Norwich City (A, 5.30pm)	3-0	Sky	Jota, Firmino, Salah
Sat 21	**Burnley (H, 12.30pm)**	**2-0**	**BT**	**Jota, Mane**
Sat 28	**Chelsea (H, 5.30pm)**	**1-1**	**Sky**	**Salah (pen)**
SEPTEMBER				
Sun 12	Leeds United (A, 4.30pm)		Sky	
Wed 15	**AC Milan (H, UCL Matchday One, 8pm)**		**BT**	
Sat 18	**Crystal Palace (H)**			
Tue 21	Norwich City (A, Carabao Cup 3, 7.45pm)		Sky	
Sat 25	Brentford (A, 5.30pm)		Sky	
Tue 28	Porto (A, UCL Matchday Two, 8pm)		BT	
OCTOBER				
Sun 3	**Manchester City (H, 4.30pm)**		**Sky**	
Sat 16	Watford (A, 12.30pm)		BT	
Tue 19	Atletico Madrid (A, UCL Matchday Three, 8pm)		BT	
Sun 24	Manchester United (A, 4.30pm)		Sky	
Wed 27	Carabao Cup 4			
Sat 30	**Brighton & Hove Albion (H)**			
NOVEMBER				
Wed 3	**Atletico Madrid (H, UCL Matchday Four, 8pm)**		**BT**	
Sat 6	West Ham United (A)			
Sat 20	**Arsenal (H)**			
Wed 24	**Porto (H, UCL Matchday Five, 8pm)**		**BT**	
Sat 27	**Southampton (H)**			
Tue 30	Everton (A)			
DECEMBER				
Sat 4	Wolverhampton Wanderers (A)			
Tue 7	AC Milan (A, UCL Matchday Six, 8pm)		BT	
Sat 11	**Aston Villa (H)**			
Wed 15	**Newcastle United (H)**			
Sat 18	Tottenham Hotspur (A)			
Wed 22	Carabao Cup 5			
Sun 26	**Leeds United (H)**			
Tue 28	Leicester City (A)			
JANUARY				
Sat 1	Chelsea (A)			
Wed 5	Carabao Cup S-F 1			
Sat 8	Emirates FA Cup 3			
Wed 12	Carabao Cup S-F 2			
Sat 15	**Brentford (H)**			
Sat 22	Crystal Palace (A)			
FEBRUARY				
Sat 5	Emirates FA Cup 4			
Wed 9	**Leicester City (H)**			
Sat 12	Burnley (A)			
Tue 15/Wed 16	UCL Ro16 1			
Sat 19	**Norwich City (H)**			
Tue 22/Wed 23	UCL Ro16 1			
Sat 26	Arsenal (A)			
Sun 27	Carabao Cup Final			
MARCH				
Wed 2	Emirates FA Cup 5			
Sat 5	**West Ham United (H)**			
Tue 8/Wed 9	UCL Ro16 2			
Sat 12	Brighton & Hove Albion (A)			
Tue 15/Wed 16	UCL Ro16 2			
Sat 19	**Manchester United (H)**			
Sat 19	Emirates FA Cup 6			
APRIL				
Sat 2	**Watford (H)**			
Tue 5/Wed 6	UCL Q-F 1			
Sat 9	Manchester City (A)			
Tue 12/Wed 13	UCL Q-F 2			
Sat 16	Aston Villa (A)			
Sat 16	Emirates FA Cup S-F			
Sat 23	**Everton (H)**			
Tue 26/Wed 27	UCL S-F 1			
Sat 30	Newcastle United (A)			
MAY				
Tue 3/Wed 4	UCL S-F 2			
Sat 7	**Tottenham Hotspur (H)**			
Sat 14	Emirates FA Cup Final			
Sun 15	Southampton (A)			
Sun 22	**Wolverhampton Wanderers (H)**			
Sat 28	UCL Final			

All fixtures are subject to change.





NEIL MELLOR

Liverpool no longer have a front-three – it's now a front-four with a clinical Diogo Jota having a big part to play

I felt for Diogo Jota last season. He made a goalscoring impact in his first season, but with games being played behind-closed-doors he never really got to connect with the Liverpool supporters.

Everyone knows how special that connection can be, so it was really good to see him start this season with the opening goals in the wins at Norwich and against Burnley at Anfield. He could really enjoy those moments and it was a reminder of how important he is.

Liverpool no longer have a front-three. It's a front-four with Jota having a big part to play. He started those two games through the middle and I like that he, Mo Salah and Sadio Mane can all play centrally or out wide.

Jota gives Jürgen Klopp a different option at nine when Roberto Firmino doesn't play. Firmino tends to drop deeper. Jota gives the opposition something more to think about closer to their goal.

He scored a hat-trick in the 5-0 Champions League win at Atalanta last year when playing through the middle and going into the September international break he had averaged a goal every 130 minutes for Liverpool – a ratio only bettered by Fred Pagnam in the 1910s.

So I think it's fair to say Jota is more clinical and more of a natural goalscorer than Firmino, who is equally as happy at getting an assist. Firmino has 63 assists for Liverpool, making him a bigger team-player than Jota, but Diogo is more direct and will score more goals.

It gives the manager options and I like how he mixes things up. We'll see Jota play in the centre, out wide and all four play in some games. The variety they bring is exceptional. My only concern is how much rest they will get with so many games coming up.

To maintain full intensity between the four of them might be a big ask and last season Liverpool lost Jota to injury for three months. His spell out coincided with the Reds not being ruthless in front of goal and hitting a run of poor form.

I look at that now and think Jota is Liverpool's most clinical centre-forward and had he been available in January and February then last season might have been a very different story.

You have to give the manager and Liverpool's recruitment team credit for bringing in a player who wasn't expected to replace one of the established front-three but has shown he is capable of doing so.

Jota has worked his way into the team without the added pressure of being seen as a 'big hitter' and is now an important attacking threat. He is five years younger than Firmino and may ultimately replace him, but right now it is any three from four upfront.

There is a lot of talk, particularly on social media, about Liverpool not bringing another attacking option in during the transfer window. Firstly, you have to ask who would come in and be happy to sit on the bench knowing there are four others ahead of you? That said, I do believe bringing in a pace option would have allowed the manager to give Salah and Mane more breathers.

That didn't materialise and now the worry is that an injury or two in attacking areas would be hugely detrimental to the team. Given what happened last season, I can understand people's concern – but then if you're an attacker you'd look at Salah, Mane, Firmino and Jota and think: if they all stay fit when am I going to get a game?

It's also worth remembering that Liverpool lost their best players in previous years whereas now we keep them because we have the manager, supporters and platform to compete for and win titles.

When you go through an era where your team is up there genuinely competing you have to enjoy it. We've had difficult times, now we have a team who can compete.

Concentrating on what we do have, rather than what we don't, and getting behind the team is important because this set of players and manager are capable of winning more and that support can help them to achieve further success.



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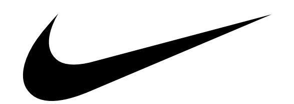
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